

Indian China Policy in the Prelude to War

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**Historical Perspectives on the
Forward Policy Decision**



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Johan Skog Jensen

¹ Eco, Umberto (1977/2002) *Kunsten å skrive en akademisk oppgave*, Idem, Oslo: 252

Abbreviations

| | | |
|------|---|-------------------------------------|
| CIA | – | Central Intelligence Agency |
| GoI | – | Government of India |
| IB | – | Intelligence Bureau |
| MEA | – | Ministry of External Affairs |
| NAI | – | National Archives of India |
| NEFA | – | North East Frontier Agency |
| NMML | – | Nehru Memorial Museum and Library |
| PLA | – | People’s Liberation Army |
| PM | – | Prime Minister |
| PRC | – | People’s Republic of China |
| UN | – | United Nations |
| UNSC | – | United Nations Security Council |
| US | – | United States |
| USSR | – | Union of Soviet Socialist Republics |

Maps

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Introduction

One early spring day in 1962, Chinese authorities presented a diplomatic note to the embassy of India in Beijing. The note was one of the first reactions to an emerging pattern of Indian policy in the disputed border areas between the two countries.² According to the Chinese, the new structure of developments was threatening and provocative: "In the past year and more (...) Indian troops have steadily pushed forward, continually set up new check-posts and extended their scope of patrol in China's territory" and "as a result, the situation along the Sino-Indian border, far from easing, has become increasingly tense since the talks between the Prime Ministers of the two countries in April, 1960." The Government of India's view could not have been more to the contrary. Indeed, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru thought it "absurd" to speak merely in terms of a border conflict when China in fact claimed large sections of Indian territory as its own.³ In addition to China's stated claim on more than 50,000 square miles of land which New Delhi considered to be Indian by law, custom and tradition, China was, the Indians insisted, unlawfully occupying an area of 12,000 square miles in the Himalayan Ladakh region, "which has always been a part of India".⁴ As a consequence of this, all Indian activity in the disputed areas was in fact argued to be perfectly legal manifestations of sovereignty on the Indian side of "the international border" – i.e. the Indian claim line. It was deemed to be the right and duty of the government "to take all necessary measures to safeguard the territorial integrity of India".⁵ What eventually came to be known as the "Forward Policy" was part and parcel of what appeared to be such necessary measures.⁶ The final objective of the new policy was to establish Indian authority over the disputed areas. This had been the primary objective of all Indian China policy since the

² Note given by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Peking, to the Embassy of India in China, 1 March 1962, in: India. Ministry of External Affairs (1962) *Notes, Memoranda and Letters Exchanged and Agreements Signed between the Governments of India and China November 1961-July 1962. White Paper VI*, Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi – hereafter designated as White Paper VI

³ Jawaharlal Nehru at press conference 13 June 1962 in New Delhi, in: Nehru, Jawaharlal (1964) *Press Conferences 1962*, Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi

⁴ Note given by the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), New Delhi, to the Embassy of China in India, 30 April, 1962, in: White Paper VI

⁵ Note given by MEA, New Delhi, to the Embassy of China in India, 13 March, 1962, in: White Paper VI

⁶ This analysis refers to the name "Forward Policy" for the official policy adopted by the Government of India on 2 November 1961. By "forward policy", it refers to the policy precursors in a broad sense, rather than to the official policy adopted on 2 November 1961 in a narrow sense. Importantly, however, the term "Forward Policy" is in itself contested. According to the official Indian view, the term is fundamentally mistaken as it may also refer to British imperial geopolitics in the Himalayas. Furthermore, the policy was officially seen as a defensive move to stem Chinese aggression; as such there was nothing "forward" about it. Nevertheless, the term "Forward Policy" was and still is employed in official Indian documents and everyday speech; "nomenclature, appearing convenient, stuck". The term is not employed as an *a priori* judgement of the policy. See Prasad, S. N. (ed.) (1992) *History of the Conflict with China, 1962*, History Division, Ministry of Defence, New Delhi: 86

territorial dispute erupted in the late 1950s. What was novel, however, was the means by which the goal was pursued. The Forward Policy represented a marked deviation from earlier Indian China policy.

This thesis intends to examine the nature of the change in policy towards China. By drawing in part on newly declassified sources and archival research, the analysis will discuss the origins and causes of India's Forward Policy decision within a broad historical framework. What factors can help explain why the Government of India opted for the Forward Policy in late 1961? And how can the decision be understood in its historical context?

The Forward Policy has later generally been considered to be the triggering cause of the 1962 war – a short but intense border war between India and the People's Republic of China in the global shadows of the Cuban crisis.⁷ Briefly put, India failed severely in its pre-war efforts to solve the border dispute and was rapidly defeated during the war. In the history of South Asian geopolitics 1962 represents an epochal landmark: "For the first time in the nation's life India faced a critical threat to its physical integrity, which it could not meet, of a sort vastly more dangerous and humiliating than the sputtering conflict with Pakistan over the status of Kashmir."⁸ Half a century later, there is still talk of a "1962 trauma" in India.⁹

The most obvious significance of the Forward Policy decision thus emanates from its pivotal role in the prelude to war. But the aim here will not be to give a comprehensive account of the causes of the Sino-Indian war. The analysis will rather focus on the origins and causes underlying one of the crucial Indian decisions that contributed to escalate the border dispute. The historical significance of the Forward Policy is not exclusively a product of the Chinese response it is often assumed to have provoked. The pre-crisis conceptualisation of the policy was in itself interesting as a momentous case of Indian foreign policy making. In particular, the process was a revealing example of changing Indian perceptions of China in the period. It also illustrated the often underestimated impact of public opinion, press and parliament in the early foreign policy making of Nehruvian India.

⁷ See Misra, Maria (2007) *Vishnu's Crowded Temple. India since the Great Rebellion*, Penguin Books, London: 309; Guruswamy, Mohan & Singh, Zorawar Daulet (2009) *India China Relations. The Border Issue and Beyond*, Viva Books, New Delhi: 72–73. Most scholars agree that the Forward Policy was a pivotal component in the prelude to war. But to what extent it was responsible for triggering the war is a matter of some discussion. Neville Maxwell puts much emphasis on the Forward Policy as the central and immediate cause of the Chinese attack in his influential book (1970/1997) *India's China War*, Natraj Publishers, Dehradun. Chandra, Mukherjee & Mukherjee on the other hand are critical of this approach and make the sweeping claim that "it can be shown that it was Chinese imperatives, of which Maxwell shows no awareness, that brought them to war, and not Indian provocation." See Chandra, Mukherjee & Mukherjee (2008) *India since Independence*, Penguin Books, New Delhi: 213

⁸ Brown, Judith M. (2004) *Nehru. A Political Life*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi: 316

⁹ Cf. Raja Mohan, C. (2003) *Crossing the Rubicon. The Shaping of India's New Foreign Policy*, Penguin Books, New Delhi: 142

The Forward Policy in brief

In essence, the new and proactive policy consisted of an innovative mixture of diplomatic as well as military pressure. After the Tibetan revolt of March 1959, border clashes in the autumn of 1959 and failed negotiations between the two Prime Ministers in April 1960, diplomatic deadlock and increasing public pressure affected Prime Minister Nehru and other Indian decision makers. A fresh approach to the dispute seemed pressing. The strained atmosphere gradually stimulated a change of policy. Through a complex process of foreign and domestic pressure, strategic analysis and political deliberation, a new policy finally took shape from November 1961.¹⁰ By spring 1962, small numbers of lightly armed Indian troops were systematically and offensively establishing series of "forward posts" scattered in unoccupied, but disputed areas. The Indian soldiers often filled vacuums close to or surrounding Chinese military positions and at times even penetrated behind the Chinese lines, thus attempting to frustrate their vital lines of supply and communication. While the Chinese described this as aggressive unilateralism, it was conceived as a defensive measure by government circles in India. As a matter of fact, Nehru's controversial minister of defence, Krishna Menon, refuted the term "Forward Policy" in itself, given that it was China that had allegedly pushed forward across the international border. He saw India's new policy merely as a defensive response to Chinese forward moves in Indian territory.¹¹ India's civilian intelligence director thought it rather ought to have been called the "No more surrender policy".¹² To the understanding of a leading officer, there was "no reason why we should not play a game of chess and a battle of wits with them, so far as the positioning of posts were concerned. If they advanced in one place, we should advance in another."¹³ In this determined, yet apparently economical fashion, the Chinese advance would be halted and possibly even reversed, while at the same time sending firm signals to India's impatient domestic audience. It was, in short, planned to be a sort of bloodless victory.

On the other hand, later critics have wryly denounced the Forward Policy as smacking of an inherently self-contradictory moral crusade, or more succinctly: of an armed *Satyagraha*.¹⁴ By some, it has simply been dismissed as "reckless" and "irrational".¹⁵ The

¹⁰ Hoffmann, Steven A. (1990) *India and the China Crisis*, University of California Press, Berkeley: 92

¹¹ Akbar, M. J. (2002) *Nehru. The Making of India*, Roli Books, New Delhi: 556

¹² Mullik, B. N. (1971) *My Years with Nehru: The Chinese Betrayal*, Allied Publishers, Bombay: 318

¹³ Kaul, B. M. (1967) *The Untold Story*, Allied Publishers, Bombay: 280

¹⁴ *Satyagraha* was the non-violent civil disobedience movement led by Mahatma Gandhi against the erstwhile colonial rulers of India. For a comparison, see for example Misra, Maria (2007) *Vishnu's Crowded Temple. India since the Great Rebellion*, Penguin Books, London: 309; Maxwell (1970/1997): 175

¹⁵ A most ardent and by now classic critique can be found in part II of Maxwell's (1970/1997) *India's China War*

basic premises of the Forward Policy may in hindsight seem paradoxical and militarily unsound.¹⁶ But the fact remains that it was adopted in the belief that it would provide an efficient counterweight to Chinese expansion and occupation. The scathing posterior critique generally concentrates on one fundamental assumption on which the entire Forward Policy seems to have been built: the calculation that the Chinese would not respond violently under pressure. To the understanding of a leading officer, "this defensive step on our part at best might irritate the Chinese but no more."¹⁷ Nehru and the Indian government not only strongly wished to avoid war, they were also certain that the Chinese would abstain from it – despite the strategic challenge of India's Forward Policy. In other terms, the policy did not seem illogical to the decision makers at that given point in time – despite the harsh criticism of later commentators. It will hence be the ambition of this analysis to understand the Forward Policy decision within the contemporary context in which it was taken. The ideal must be to understand the decision on its own terms.

With the benefit of hindsight, we know that the key assumption of Chinese moderation in the face of Indian forward movements turned out to be fatally flawed. On 8 September 1962 a crisis emerged near an Indian forward post called Dhola, on the disputed borders of the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA, known as *Arunachal Pradesh* since 1972).¹⁸ Fuelled by an aggressive Indian interpretation of the Forward Policy and by equally determined Chinese countermoves, the Dhola crisis soon escalated. What had originally been envisaged as a "game of chess and a battle of wits" had now in fact been reduced to a "giants' version of chicken".¹⁹ And as none of the giants would step back, the situation eventually came out of control. On 20 October 1962, China invaded India both in the eastern and western sections of the frontier. Thus began a war which still casts Himalayan shadows on the shiny landscape of emerging Asia.

Contemporary relevance

There is a considerable corpus of literature that deals comprehensively with the war. This analysis will rather attempt to give a nuanced exposition of a small, but important part of the whole. Although the Forward Policy decision has been discussed and reviewed a number of times in general analyses of the Sino-Indian border dispute, it has rarely been studied in

¹⁶ Dalvi, J.P. (1969/1997) *Himalayan Blunder. The Curtain Raiser to the Sino-Indian War of 1962*, Natraj Publishers, Dehradun: 147

¹⁷ Kaul 1967: 284

¹⁸ Hoffmann 1990: 7. Dhola was arguably situated in *de jure* Chinese territory, depending on one's point of view.

¹⁹ Maxwell 1970/1997: 256

depth.²⁰ The policy is usually presented as one of many factors leading to conflict, and is primarily seen in direct relation to the war itself. The Forward Policy decision has seldom been interpreted within a broader historical context. Given that the complex historical process leading up to the Forward Policy decision was in itself an interesting illustration of early Indian China policy and strategic thinking, the subject merits an individual study. Moreover, there has not been done much scholarly work on this particular topic in the recent 20 years, the last comprehensive and detailed study being a section in Steven A. Hoffmann's 1990 *India and the China Crisis*.²¹ Given that new primary sources have been declassified and released from both Indian and American archives since 1990, a fresh historical approach to India's contentious Forward Policy decision would appear to have a valid *raison d'être*.

Furthermore: to the extent that new interpretations of Indian China policy can be added, it can also be considered beneficial from a contemporary policy perspective. E. H. Carr once argued that the writing of history is "a dialogue between the events of the past and progressively emerging future ends."²² Interpretations of history carry weight in the development of current Sino-Indian relations, and *vice versa*. The problematic past – which still colours Indian perceptions of China – is in many ways increasing in importance, precisely because the Sino-Indian bilateral relationship is also increasingly important. Perceptions of past and present are interlinked. Just like lofty visions for the future can colour interpretations of past events, interpretations of the past can also reflect on visions, and fears, for the future – perhaps especially so in post-1962 India.

In the changing balance of global power, the two simultaneously rising powers of India and China seek to redefine their historically complicated relationship. Publicly, the two governments express political optimism for the future of Sino-Indian relations.²³ This positive and reciprocal tone of friendship is most clearly reflected in the very rapidly expanding bilateral trade and in political co-operation in new forums such as BRICS and G-20. In the period 1990–2010 Sino-Indian trade increased from USD 265 million to USD 61,74 billion, growing more than 230 times.²⁴ China is now India's largest trading partner and the two states

²⁰ Esteemed accounts include Hoffmann (1990) and Maxwell (1979/1990), as well as Kavic, Lorne J. (1967) *India's Quest for Security: Defence Policies, 1947–1965*, University of California Press, Berkeley.

²¹ An exception would be Srinath Raghavan's well researched and newly published *War and Peace in Modern India* which deals comprehensively with Nehruvian India's strategic history; Raghavan, Srinath (2010) *War and Peace in Modern India*, Permanent Black, Ranikhet

²² Carr, E.H. (1961/1990) *What is History?*, Penguin Books, London: 123

²³ See for example the joint declaration "A Shared Vision for the 21st Century of the Republic of India and the People's Republic of China" signed by the two governments in Beijing 14 January 2008. Cited in Acharya, Alka (2008) *China & India: Politics of Incremental Engagement*, Har-Anand Publications, New Delhi: 239–243

²⁴ Cf. www.mea.gov.in (accessed 3 April 2011)

are gradually widening their scope of co-operation to other fields as well. Nevertheless, there is another side to the coin. India still has a considerable 1962 complex, despite the political and economic visions of future Sino-Indian partnership in Asia and the world.²⁵ The border dispute that led to war in 1962 has been politically stabilised since 1988, but still remains fundamentally unresolved. History would seem to be India's diplomatic *magister vitae*; the humiliating débâcle of 1962 must never be repeated. In other words, a complex mixture of political and economic optimism combine with a historical sense of hard learnt realpolitik in contemporary India's relations with China. Given that perceptions of history still play a role in contemporary Indian perceptions of China, a critical review of India's pre-war policy seems relevant. All the more so in the present times of profound geopolitical change in Asia.

Structure

Before moving to the historical analysis proper, the nature of the available primary and secondary sources will be accounted for in the following section, accompanied by a review of some relevant historiographical perspectives. In chapter one, the historical origins that shaped independent India's China policy will be outlined. In effect, this complex historical landscape furnished the underlying tensions that would characterise Sino-Indian relations, and which ultimately provided the root causes of the Forward Policy decision. Having thus examined the historical fundamentals of India's relations with China, the widening chasm that characterised the relationship from 1959 to 1960 will be portrayed in chapter two. This period, from the Tibetan revolt to the failure of diplomacy in 1960–1961, formed the immediate background to the adoption of the Forward Policy in the "narrow" or formal sense of the term. It will, however be argued that a forward policy in a "wide" sense was conceived already by 1959. With Indian perceptions and political positions vis-à-vis China hardening, the processes leading up to the actual Forward Policy decision on 2 November 1961 will be discussed in detail throughout chapter three. The implementation of the Forward Policy and its intended and unintended effects will briefly be hinted at – without this being the principal focus of the analysis. Finally, a summarising conclusion on the causes and origins of India's Forward Policy decision will be given.

²⁵ See for example Hoffmann, Steven A. (2004) *Perception and China Policy in India*, in, Frankel, Francine R. & Harding, Harry (ed.) (2004) *The India-China Relationship. What the United States Needs to Know*, Columbia University Press, New York: 38. One contemporary manifestation of this "1962 complex" can be found in the former cabinet minister (BJP) and prolific writer Arun Shourie's book (2008) revealingly entitled *Are we deceiving ourselves again? Lessons the Chinese taught Pandit Nehru but which we refuse to learn*, Rupa & Co., New Delhi

Historiographical Perspectives

The Sino-Indian border conflict has left a considerable historical footprint. As time has passed a number of primary sources have been made accessible to public scrutiny. Together, these documents permit several readings of the prelude to war and provide an important key to grasp how and why the Forward Policy was adopted by the Government of India. A colourful mosaic of historical interpretations has already taken shape on the basis of this complex source material. Analyses of the Forward Policy decision can therefore also profit from a wide array of established historical perspectives, arguments and theories on the subject of Sino-Indian relations in general and the war of 1962 in particular. A survey of the nature of the sources will elucidate the empirical foundations on which the interpretations in the following chapters are based.

Primary sources

It has convincingly been argued that the Government of India released too much sensitive information during the dispute with China.²⁶ As a result of this, there is an unusually broad selection of primary sources available for research on the prelude to the 1962 war.²⁷ These primary sources constitute important windows into the government's policy making and approach to the dispute with China. India's liberal democracy also provided its educated élites with ample room for a plethora of thoughts and views. These opinions were expressed through effective vehicles of communication such as a large press corps, a loquacious parliament and general freedom of thought and speech. Accordingly, it is also possible to trace the development of the Forward Policy through the eyes of journalists and through parliamentary records.²⁸ In this analysis, however, the main focus will be on the decision makers in the Government of India – and hence on sources pertaining directly to the government and the decision makers themselves.

Open sources from the Government of India

The most voluminous primary source can be found in the Government of India's white papers. Seven of these white papers cover the period from summer 1954 to the outbreak of war in October 1962. They include presumably all "notes, memoranda and letters exchanged and

²⁶ Maxwell 1970/1997: 14; Hoffmann 1990: 67

²⁷ Maxwell 1970/1997: 11

²⁸ For a study on the role of parliament's influence in the shaping of Indian China policy, see Jetly, Nancy (1979) *India-China Relations 1947-1977. A Study of Parliament's Role in the Making of Foreign Policy*, Radiant Publishers, New Delhi

agreements signed between the governments of India and China" in the given period.²⁹ In other words, all minor and major messages exchanged between the two governments are to be found in these comprehensive collections of diplomatic papers, including the seminal personal letters exchanged between the two Prime Ministers. The first white paper was published on 7 September 1959 and was followed by updated editions at regular intervals. An indication of the importance of the information released, and hence also an indication of its valuable nature as a primary source, can be found in the contemporary reception of the white papers. Nehru's 1959 decision to accede to a parliamentary request and release what had thus far been confidential information, resulted in a hitherto unknown escalation of public criticism and parliamentary pressure on the government's China policy. Steven A. Hoffmann defines the release of the white papers as a crucial turning point in the conflict.³⁰

As a result of their inherent historical role, convenient accessibility, unmatched comprehensiveness and detailed information from both Indian and Chinese perspectives, the white papers have functioned as a principal primary source for a number of histories of the Sino-Indian conflict. Read chronologically, the diplomatic exchanges between the two countries reflect the gradual development and deterioration of bilateral relations. But by themselves alone, they can hardly be regarded as a sufficient source for interpreting internal policy processes in the Indian government. Strictly speaking, the white papers only contain what the Government of India deemed fit to release to the public; some specific contents could have been omitted deliberately. Were they doctored, the white papers could theoretically lead to biased historical interpretations.³¹ The uncritical historian could so to say be duped by a careful selection of documents and therefore produce an historical narrative consonant with the government's desired perception of the past. Nevertheless, given that the white papers were accessible to the Chinese side – and judging from the public reception that they also contained actually sensitive information – these doubts could appear somewhat speculative. Read critically in parallel with other primary sources and secondary literature, the white papers are an indispensable source with perspectives from both the Chinese and Indian sides of the table – despite the theoretical possibility of government manipulation.

Other printed primary sources from the Government of India include a large amount of official statements, minutes of press conferences and speeches. Like the white papers these

²⁹ India. Ministry of External Affairs (1959) *Notes, Memoranda and Letters Exchanged and Agreements Signed between the Governments of India and China 1954-1959. White Paper*, Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi. Henceforth designated as White Paper I.

³⁰ Hoffmann 1990: 67

³¹ See McCullagh, C. Behan (2000) *Bias in Historical Description, Interpretation and Explanation*, History and Theory, Vol. 39, No. 1, Wesleyan University Press: 47

sources convey the official views and arguments of the government. As such, they also provide an historical window into New Delhi's public presentation and understanding of the conflict. But in contrast to the white papers they were primarily designed to handle an increasingly agitated domestic audience, not the critical Chinese government. Hence they often tend to be more outspoken and less technical than the white papers. This rhetorical contrast is in itself telling of the duality between the internal and external dimensions of Indian China policy.

Individual accounts

In addition to official government sources, there is a variety of subjective accounts available – produced for publication and general readership. These works – primarily memoirs – largely represent exercises in self-defence and justification of own roles and actions. The genre must therefore be carefully appreciated in connection with the crushing sense of defeat after the war and, arguably, the subsequent desire of many decision makers to absolve themselves of guilt and responsibility. However, the personal accounts do provide valuable historical raw material in the form of first-hand accounts from central policy makers and agents – especially when read in parallel with other sources. The personal rendition of the central and politically well connected chief of general staff, lieutenant general B. M. Kaul, for example provides a tendentious but telling view as seen from the highest levels of command in the Indian Army; so does the detailed analysis of the then director of military operations, brigadier D. K. Palit.³² B. N. Mullik, director of the civilian Intelligence Bureau (IB) and a personal friend of Nehru, also wrote a crucial account, especially with regards to the role he and the bureau played in supplying intelligence estimates underlying the Forward Policy decision.³³ Furthermore, a series of memoirs and diaries written by Indian and American diplomats with a role in the conflict have also been published in the aftermath of the war.³⁴ Last, but not least, Jawaharlal Nehru was himself a prolific and eloquent man of letters, both before and during his time in office. His numerous historical and political writings on India, China and Asia in general reflect personal patterns of thought which to a large extent would shape independent India's foreign policy. Without actually discussing the Forward Policy decision explicitly, Nehru's

³² Kaul 1967, Palit, D. K. (1991) *War in High Himalaya: The Indian Army in Crisis*, Lancer, New Delhi; see also brigadier Dalvi 1969/1997 for a professional military perspective on the Forward Policy decision.

³³ Mullik, B. N. (1971) *My Years with Nehru: The Chinese Betrayal*, Allied Publishers, Bombay

³⁴ Relevant examples include Galbraith, John Kenneth (1969) *Ambassador's Journal. A Personal Account of the Kennedy Years*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston; Singh, K. Natwar (2009) *My China Diary 1956-1988*, Rupa & Co., New Delhi; and Mehta, Jagat S. (2010) *The Tryst Betrayed: Reflections on Diplomacy and Development*, Penguin, New Delhi

personal writings illustrate the larger context of his pre-1962 thinking on Sino-Indian relations. As a whole these primary sources can – in a wide sense – give an indication of the Prime Minister's fundamental understanding of international relations.³⁵ As regards the border dispute in particular, the personal letters to Zhou Enlai, accessible in the white papers, remain a particularly rich source for understanding the Prime Minister's argumentation vis-à-vis China. His early personal thinking on the subject is most eminently expressed in a candid exchange of notes with Home and Deputy Prime Minister Vallabhbhai Patel.³⁶ Through archival research in New Delhi, this thesis has also been able to draw on unpublished personal letters from Nehru to various Indian diplomats. Important fragments of Nehru's thinking on China are thus available to scrutiny.

Fresh sources

The various personal accounts and open government sources have all been public for a relatively long time, and have thus been subject to a number of studies. But there are also primary sources which have been declassified fairly recently. They can still reveal important nuances in regard to the adoption of the Forward Policy.³⁷ One central source was released in 2002 when the Government of India declassified an official "History of the Conflict with China, 1962".³⁸ Completed in 1992 by the History Division of the Ministry of Defence, this originally restricted analysis is the nearest the Government of India comes to giving an official and comprehensive version of the course of events before and during the 1962 war. A major benefit with the official history is its unrivalled access to classified primary sources, "including the top-secret Henderson Brooks Report".³⁹ Materials that are still classified are not cited in the public 2002 version, but notes are allegedly available in a master copy in the Ministry of Defence.⁴⁰ Although mainly concerned with events during the war itself the official history also throws light on the prelude to war – as seen, redacted and presented by the Government of India three decades after the war.

³⁵ Prominent examples being his classic works *Discovery of India* (originally published in 1946) and *Glimpses of World History* (originally published in 1934).

³⁶ Patel, Vallabhbhai (1974) *Sardar Patel's Correspondence 1945–50*, Vol. X, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad: 335–347

³⁷ Although for example Guruswamy & Singh (2009) examine the new sources within the framework of a general review of Sino-Indian relations: 73–77

³⁸ Prasad, S. N. (ed.) (1992) *History of the Conflict with China, 1962*, History Division, Ministry of Defence, New Delhi

³⁹ Prasad 1992: preface v

⁴⁰ Prasad 1992: preface v

A second ample and relatively unexplored primary source available since 2007 are the comprehensive studies of the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).⁴¹ Composed in three sections between March 1963 and May 1964, these intelligence analyses deal elaborately with the prelude to war and provide knowledgeable perspectives on the Indian foreign policy process. The empirical information in the intelligence analyses seems to indicate that the Americans had access to highly placed sources within the Indian government and defence establishment. Among other things they include résumés of important cabinet meetings. Combined with the diplomatic documents available in the collection *Foreign Relations of the United States* and the published journal of the US ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith (1961–1963), the CIA papers thus constitute a well informed external supplement to Indian primary sources.⁴²

Thirdly, new and unpublished material has been made accessible to public scrutiny in Indian archives over the last decades. It is currently possible to examine the personal papers of a series of central Indian officials such as Nehru's sister and ambassador Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit or Foreign Secretary Subimal Dutt.⁴³ Given, in addition to new archival access, the comprehensiveness and fairly recent release of both the Government of India's official history (2002) and the CIA analysis (2007), a fresh study of the Forward Policy decision would appear to be due.⁴⁴

Secondary sources

The historical literature on the Sino-Indian border conflict in general is vast.⁴⁵ The lion's share of these secondary sources is of Indian origin and often has a strong patriotic undertone. Being a post-colonial and multiethnic state pursuing policies of nation-building, nationalist interpretations of history were common staple in Nehruvian India.⁴⁶ The experience of war in

⁴¹ United States. Central Intelligence Agency (1963-1964) *The Sino-Indian Border Dispute Sections 1-3: 1950-1962*. Available online (29.03.2010) <http://www.foia.cia.gov/cpe.asp>

⁴² See Galbraith 1969. FRUS include the following relevant volumes:

United States. Department of State (1987) *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957. Volume VIII. South Asia*, Department of State, Washington DC,

United States. Department of State (1992) *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-1960. Volume XV. South and Southeast Asia*, Department of State, Washington DC,

United States. Department of State (1996) *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963. Volume XIX. South Asia*, Department of State, Washington DC.

⁴³ In India, the Foreign Secretary is the most senior civil servant in the Ministry of External Affairs.

⁴⁴ The last in-depth study can be found in Hoffmann 1990. An exception is the well documented research of Srinath Raghavan, see Raghavan 2010 – a comprehensive history of Nehruvian security policy which in part also deals with early Indian China policy.

⁴⁵ Guha, Ramachandra (2008) *India after Gandhi: the History of the World's Largest Democracy*, Picador, New Delhi: 812, note 24

⁴⁶ As indeed it is in most young states; Iggers, Georg G., et al. (2008) *A Global History of Modern Historiography*, Pearson Longman, Harlow: 237

1962 became a nation building project.⁴⁷ The memorable sensation of unity and purpose against what was portrayed as an external aggressor has been reflected in subsequent historical writing.

On the other hand there are also recent and scholarly Indian studies at hand.⁴⁸ Furthermore, a series of primarily Anglo-American accounts have been written. On the whole, the existing literature on the Sino-Indian conflict can be divided in two broad strands of interpretation – or what could be termed as two irreconcilable schools of thought.⁴⁹

The "pro-Indian" school

The first line of argument was formulated in the aftermath of the 1962 war and during the high tide of the global cold war. It principally saw the conflict through a legal and historical prism, and expressed sympathy for democratic India as a victim of communist Chinese aggression. Early Western accounts include the Dutch diplomat Willem Frederik van Eekelen's legal analysis (1967) as well as Dorothy Woodman's well researched historical survey of the conflict (1969).⁵⁰ This first broad strand of interpretation saw the Chinese actions in October 1962 as historically unjustifiable and illegally excessive. Different versions of the historical-legal approach are still current and to some extent popularly dominant in India.⁵¹

On the other hand, the British historian Alastair Lamb systematically reviewed and challenged the historical fundamentals of the "pro-Indian" school through detailed studies on the history of Asian frontiers and borders.⁵² Lorne J. Kavic also gave a critical account of pre-war Indian security policy in his 1967 *India's Quest for Security*, which included a brief analysis of the Forward Policy.⁵³ Nevertheless, Kavic and Lamb primarily added nuances to the established historical interpretations. They did not fundamentally challenge the dominant Indian and Western perception of Nehruvian India as a victim of Chinese bellicosity.

⁴⁷ Maria Misra talks of the eruption of a "nationalist hysteria" after the Chinese attack; Misra 2007: 309

⁴⁸ The best current example of which is found in Raghavan 2010

⁴⁹ Hoffmann 1990: 3

⁵⁰ Woodman, Dorothy (1969) *Himalayan Frontiers*, Barrie and Rockliff The Cresset Press, London, and, Eekelen, W. F. van (1967) *Indian Foreign Policy and the Border Dispute with China*, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague. Eekelen served at NATO when the book was published, but had first hand diplomatic experience of the developing conflict during his posting in New Delhi 1957–1960.

⁵¹ Recent examples of a classical legal-historical approach include Pokharna, Bhawna (2009) *India-China Relations: Dimensions and Perspectives*, New Century Publications, New Delhi, and, Das, Gautam (2009) *China-Tibet-India: the 1962 War and the Strategic Military Future*, Har-Anand Publications, New Delhi

⁵² Works by Alastair Lamb include the widely read (1964) *The India-China Border. The Origins of the Disputed Boundaries*, Oxford University Press, London, and, (1968) *Asian Frontiers. Studies in a Continuing Problem*, Pall Mall Press, London

⁵³ Kavic 1967: 169–174

The revisionist school

Taking Lamb's inquisitive review of Sino-Indian frontier history further, the journalist and Oxford scholar Neville Maxwell did challenge the established historical perceptions. Indeed, he completely rejected the idea of Chinese aggression by launching a new and critical second line of argument. In his 1970 book *India's China War*, Maxwell basically argues that it was in fact self-righteous Indian intransigence that had forced China to resort to power politics.⁵⁴ For Maxwell, the Forward Policy decision became the ultimate proof of India's incompetent handling of the border dispute. Indeed, he suggests that it was India – through its reckless Forward Policy – that caused the Chinese attack.⁵⁵ In the period 1959–1967 he worked as a correspondent for the London *Times*, and had the privilege of access to both important people and documents in a fashion that lends the book an almost primary source quality. Maxwell states that he has "drawn on material from unpublished files and reports of the Government of India and the Indian Army" and adds that the actual first hand impression of events may have transmitted insights that will not be attainable for later historians dependent on mainly written sources.⁵⁶ The intellectual power of Maxwell's work has been amply illustrated by some of the fierce Indian indignation over it. In the provoked words of general Kaul, who was severely criticised in the book,

I have read this book carefully more than once and think that it should be taken with a pinch of salt as it is full of half-truths, distortions and factually incorrect statements (...) Also, it establishes the unsavoury fact that the standards of morality of some of our senior civil and military officials, who were unpatriotic enough to have divulged our national secrets to a foreigner, are deplorable (...) Does Maxwell think that India should have acquiesced in all Chinese aggressive moves and surrendered her fundamental rights to defend her own territory and let a foreign power capture it just because the latter was more powerful than her? Does honour and patriotism mean anything to Maxwell?⁵⁷

Maxwell – who had virtually no access to Chinese sources – has often been accused both of failing to account for ulterior Chinese motives and of systematically pro-Chinese interpretations.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, his revisionist study of the 1962 war was groundbreaking in its meticulous detail and unprecedented access to primary sources. For a long time it was

⁵⁴ Maxwell 1970/1997: 175, 287

⁵⁵ Maxwell 1970/1997: part II "The Forward Policy"

⁵⁶ Maxwell 1970/1997: 13

⁵⁷ Kaul, B. M. (13.01.1972) interview by A. K. Gupta & S. R. Bakshi, Oral History Transcript, NMML: 144–145

⁵⁸ Mehra, Parshotam (2007) *Essays in Frontier History: India, China and the Disputed Border*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi: 277–284. As a journalist, Maxwell was interestingly enough also a vocal critic of India's democracy and repeatedly predicted its fall – as well as the disintegration of the multiethnic Indian republic. In 1967 he symptomatically wrote about the "the fourth – and surely last – general election". Guha 2008: 417

generally considered to be the most comprehensive and persuasive account available – at least for non-Indian readers.⁵⁹

Recent historiographical developments

Reviewing the heated historical debate from a distance of two decades, the political scientist Steven A. Hoffmann saw the historiography of the Sino-Indian conflict as a dialectical process of mutually opposed schools. This historiographical dialectic called for a fresh synthesis: a third, less biased and better researched analysis incorporating a wider set of perspectives and sources than the "pro" and "contra" schools of the 1960s and 70s. Arguably, Hoffmann's detailed analysis (1990) of Indian decision making in the period before and during the war remains the most thoroughly researched and balanced account of the Forward Policy thus far.⁶⁰ The following chapters will to a large extent seek to follow the line of synthesis proposed by him, but will also draw freely on insights from the other strands of interpretation. A critical, but pragmatic attitude to earlier research seems appropriate. Hoffmann's review of the Forward Policy is only rivalled by Maxwell in detail and comprehensiveness. Both accounts, together with newer contextual studies by for example Srinath Raghavan (2010) and Ramachandra Guha (2008), will hence be important sources of reference for this analysis – despite the at times diverging arguments and conclusions.

The sources and the past

Scholars like Hoffmann, Kavic and Maxwell strengthened the empirical foundation of their studies by conducting a number of interviews in the aftermath of the war with involved officers and civil servants.⁶¹ Maxwell experienced the prelude to war *in persona* as a journalist in New Delhi. Half a century later the available primary sources are almost exclusively in written form. The past would, at first glance, seem to be less accessible than in the 1960s. But it can also be argued that temporal – and political – distance has its benefits. New accounts of the Forward Policy can not only build upon the information processed by the pioneer scholars, but also enjoy the privilege of access to a greater variety of printed primary sources. Furthermore, it can be argued that modern scholars of Sino-Indian relations have the advantage of operating within a political climate which is comparatively less polemical than

⁵⁹ Hoffmann 1990: 3

⁶⁰ Guha 2008: 812, note 24. For a recent and well researched account of Nehruvian security policy in general, see Raghavan 2010.

⁶¹ Unlike Kavic (1967) and Maxwell (1970), Hoffmann published his book in 1990, but had done research on the topic as early as 1966–1970 when he conducted interviews with a number of Indian officials. Hoffmann 1990: 271. For a list of interviews, see op. cit.: 307–309

in the 1960s and 1970s, at least as far as questions of personal guilt and responsibility are concerned. The temporal and emotional buffer may potentially facilitate a more mature approach to the traces and memories of this controversial past.

Historical sources will always be incomplete traces from a vastly more complex past. While recognising that the available sources do provide a substantial amount of information about the past specifically in concern, a prudent assertion of what they do not reveal is equally imperative. Because of the remaining political sensitivity attached to the Forward Policy and to the Sino-Indian war in general, some presumably central government documents are still classified. In particular, the Henderson Brooks Report – commissioned by the Indian Army after the war to account for the 1962 defeat – remains classified.⁶² In other words the available Indian source material is deliberately imperfect. But this imperfection does not impede the writing of history as such. Indeed, all historical source materials are ultimately imperfect. And despite lack of direct access to documents like the Henderson Brooks Report, it is possible to follow the creation of the Forward Policy through other high level Indian government sources, a number of which were either made public shortly after their creation, were leaked, or which have recently been declassified. The deepest thoughts and private reflections of key policy makers, on the other hand, may perhaps never be known. Sources of this nature would be more illuminating than the Government of India's published documents and would be ideal as a primary source.⁶³ Both Prime Minister Nehru and Defence Minister Krishna Menon's private archives remain closed to most outsiders. Only few and personally trusted individuals have been granted access to the extensive Nehru papers by his family; this important primary source is thus at the very best only indirectly accessible to other historians.⁶⁴ To some extent, interpretations of the policy deliberations and calculations of central figures like Prime Minister Nehru and his Defence Minister Krishna Menon may hence have a character of qualified construction rather than perfect reconstruction.

⁶² Neville Maxwell is nevertheless assumed to have had access to the report. Maxwell has summarised what he presents as the main content of the report in the article (2001) *Henderson Brooks Report: An Introduction*, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 36, No. 14/15, Mumbai: 1189–1193. In Maxwell's opinion, the report is of minor contemporary relevance and does not contain any substantial new information. For a reasoned assumption of Maxwell's access to the report, see for example A. G. Noorani's 2008 essay "1962 - *Untold Story*" available online (26.03.2010) <http://www.hinduonnet.com/fline/fl2512/stories/20080620251208200.htm>

⁶³ Trachtenberg, Marc (2006) *The Craft of International History: a Guide to Method*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey: 153

⁶⁴ Nehru's trusted colleague and "official" biographer, Sarvepalli Gopal (1979, 1984), as well as the historian Ramachandra Guha (2008) are among the privileged few. Their works have hence been important secondary sources for assessments of Nehru.

Importantly, the problem of inadequate sources is not an uncommon challenge for international historians.⁶⁵ It does not necessarily reduce the writing of international history to a branch of literature dependent on the imagination and narrative topoi.⁶⁶ It rather implies the need for an approach to past reality that is conscious of its imperfect empirical foundations, but analytically open to the available sources as windows into the same historical reality. It is not a question of all or nothing. It is possible to reach historical conclusions despite imperfect sources – as long as these conclusions reflect the imperfections on which they are based. Historians cannot perfectly reconstruct the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*, but the Rankean ideal of historical research can nonetheless be useful as a contrast to the equally radical idea of history writing as pure construction. In practice, most historians operate somewhere in between these theoretical extremes.⁶⁷ Recognising the "foreignness" of the past and our lack of complete access to it does not mean that it cannot be understood historically. Historians seek to create maps, they do not strive to replicate entire historical landscapes. But a good map is only a simplification of a reality vastly more complex, not a constructed fiction.

⁶⁵ A similar challenge is reflected in historical accounts of President Roosevelt and U.S. Japan policy in the prelude to Pearl Harbour and the Pacific war. See Garver 2001: 91

⁶⁶ For a discussion of history as an essentially fictional narrative: Hayden White (2001) *The Historical Text as Literary Artifact*, in, (red.) Robert, G. (2001) *The History and Narrative Reader*, Routledge, London: 224–225

⁶⁷ See for example Carroll Noël's critique of Hayden White in (2001) *Interpretation, History and Narrative*, in, (red.) Robert, G. (2001) *The History and Narrative Reader*, Routledge, London: 258

I

In the Shadow of Empires: The Historical Landscape

The Forward Policy decision was the outcome of an historical process intricately woven within a larger context. In order to understand the origins of the policy it is therefore necessary to study the wider historical landscape in which it was rooted and grew. While taking a panoramic view of this scenery, two fundamental and increasingly incompatible tendencies in India's relations with China from 1947 to 1959 will be analytically emphasised: (i) Nehruvian visions of India-China relations and (ii) geopolitical developments on India's northern flank. Finally, the way in which the first element was overshadowed by the second in an increasingly difficult marriage will be discussed in a brief conclusion. In its essentials, it was as if the bright morning light of independence was haunted by shadows of times past. It is within this twilight of Asian co-operation and post-imperial tensions that the principal contextual origins of the Forward Policy decision can be sought.

(i) Nehruvian China policy – visions of greatness

India's early foreign policy was shaped by a brittle balance between material constraints and political ambitions. It could be interpreted as a compromise between its enfeebled point of departure and its future potential. Nehru's preponderant role as the intellectual father of Indian foreign policy will first be rudimentally outlined along with an overview of the fundamental architecture of the new foreign policy. From this analytical point of departure, the principal characteristics of early Indian China policy will be discussed.

Nehru: primus inter pares

Jawaharlal Nehru was not only India's first Prime Minister (PM), he was also the first External Affairs Minister. In fact, he held both positions continuously from independence until his death in 1964.⁶⁸ But his influence on Indian foreign policy was far weightier than may be accounted for by the formal powers of office. At the time of independence Nehru was in many respects first among equals when it came to international politics. In an Indian National Congress oriented towards domestic politics, foreign affairs were a largely neglected domain.⁶⁹ In the field of international relations, Gandhi acknowledged his disciple Nehru as

⁶⁸ Nayar & Paul 2004: 115

⁶⁹ Guha 2008: 152

master, not the other way around.⁷⁰ This preponderant position was founded upon Nehru's sound knowledge of and keen interest in the world outside India.⁷¹ As such it was also a reflection of his numerous travels abroad, his élite education in Europe and his wide international network and experience. He was in sum one of a kind among the political leaders of India in 1947 and along with Gandhi he became an iconic face towards the outside world.⁷² Through his knowledge, experience and charismatic leadership – as well as a relative lack of qualified peers – he effectively became the architect of Indian foreign policy.⁷³ The China policy was in particular considered to be a brainchild of Nehru.⁷⁴ He had a personal interest in India-China relations going back to the 1920s and was a driving force in fostering a strong bilateral relationship after independence.⁷⁵

But if the guiding political premises of the new foreign policy were laid by one individual, he was nevertheless not alone in implementing and shaping foreign policy. And while the influential Prime Minister can be regarded as the master architect, he was not the only Indian competent in foreign affairs.⁷⁶ New institutions fostered by Nehru such as the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), the Indian Foreign Service and the civilian Intelligence Bureau (IB) gradually became important sources of professional competence and advice. In particular, select ambassadors and high level bureaucrats within the MEA and the IB won the Prime Minister's ear.⁷⁷ Among the most important figures in the implementation of India's early China policy was for example the historian K. M. Panikkar who served as the first envoy and ambassador to China from 1948 to 1952. He personally encouraged Sino-Indian friendship with gusto and has later often been accused of having been exceedingly blue-eyed and enthusiastic towards the Maoist regime and its political intentions.⁷⁸ In a personal letter to his sister and ambassador in Washington DC, Nehru considered his envoy in Beijing to be “so keen that it over-shoots the mark and goes much further ahead than fact warrants”, but he also added that Panikkar was “a man of extraordinarily acute intelligence and powers of observation (...) his analysis of a situation, apart from the time factor, is usually good.”⁷⁹

⁷⁰ Kapur, Harish (2009) *Foreign Policies of India's Prime Ministers*, Lancer, New Delhi: 23

⁷¹ Brown 2004: 244

⁷² Brown 2004: 271; Guha 2008: 154

⁷³ Kapur 2009: 14, 31

⁷⁴ Brown 2004: 324; Sarin, Harish Chandra (12.02.1991) interview by S. L. Machanda, Oral History Transcript, NMML: 262; Dalvi 1969/1997: 95

⁷⁵ Brown 2004: 267

⁷⁶ Cf. Raghavan 2010: 21

⁷⁷ Raghavan 2010: 22

⁷⁸ Guha 2008: 168; Kapur 2009: 34–35; Brown 2004: 267

⁷⁹ Letter from Nehru to V. L. Pandit dated 30 August 1950, in: subject file 60, 1st instalment, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit Papers, NMML

Other bureaucrats Nehru trusted with regard to China policy would include figures such as the influential director of the Intelligence Bureau, B. N. Mullik and Foreign Secretaries like Subimal Dutt and M. J. Desai.⁸⁰ Nehru was thus far from alone in running Indian diplomacy, but his basic policies were nonetheless rarely challenged by the foreign policy bureaucracy.

Within the political establishment there were also relatively few who substantially restrained or influenced Nehru in his larger foreign policy deliberations.⁸¹ The most noteworthy exception was Nehru's vigorous Home and Deputy Prime Minister Vallabhbhai Patel, "the iron man of India".⁸² His standing was such that he could afford major disagreements with the Prime Minister – which was several times the case.⁸³ Patel would among other things distance himself markedly from Nehru's China policy during the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950.⁸⁴ However, he passed away a few weeks later that very same year and had minimal impact on the policy. After Patel's death, Nehru was largely left alone with his own camp followers and was not seriously challenged until much later when the China crisis was already a matter of fact. In effect, Nehru personally dominated the Indian foreign policy process for almost two decades.⁸⁵ In his foreign policy entourage, Krishna Menon was a particularly important character.⁸⁶ Menon was widely considered to be a sparklingly intelligent intellectual, a close confidant of Nehru and a cultured thinker rooted in a Marxist world view. However, he was also described as arrogant, short-tempered and volatile.⁸⁷ He moreover had a basic distrust of the military establishment.⁸⁸ The anti-militarist attitude reflected on Menon's tenure as Defence Minister from 1957 to 1962 and arguably had far-reaching consequences for the Indian Army.⁸⁹ To some extent, Nehru shared Menon's sceptical view of the armed forces, which was an institution inherited from the Raj.⁹⁰ Indeed, according to the foreign policy analyst Stephen P. Cohen, one of the distinct features of the Indian foreign policy process was the lack of professional military input.⁹¹ This strategic absence can in part be seen as a consequence of the fact that the Indian Army was short of

⁸⁰ For a concise review of the most central actors in early Indian foreign policy see Raghavan 2010: 21–25

⁸¹ Raghavan 2010: 25

⁸² Nayar & Paul 2004: 118; Kapur 2009: 31

⁸³ Kapur 2009: 31–32; Gopal 1979: 37

⁸⁴ See Patel's personal letter to Nehru dated 7 November 1950. Patel, Vallabhbhai (1974) *Sardar Patel's Correspondence 1945-50*, Vol. X, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad: 335–341

⁸⁵ Brown 2004: 245. Jonathan Holslag refers to a de facto "personalization" of Indian foreign policy: Holslag, Jonathan (2010) *China and India: Prospects for Peace*, Columbia University Press, New York: 33, 36

⁸⁶ Raghavan 2010: 22

⁸⁷ Akbar 2008: 558; Guha 2008: 166–167; Raghavan 2010: 22; Sarin 12.02.91

⁸⁸ Hoffmann 1990: 46

⁸⁹ Brown 2004: 322–323; Maxwell 1970/1997: 185

⁹⁰ Cohen 2002: 128–130

⁹¹ Cohen 2002: 77

senior staff officers – it was still reliant on British expertise – but can also be interpreted within the framework of a certain anti-militarist mindset in the aftermath of Gandhi and independence. Military leaders were effectively excluded from the foreign policy process whereas civilian leaders wielded considerable influence in professional military matters. In short, the Nehruvian foreign policy process was not necessarily void of competent actors, but the Prime Minister effectively reined the process with no major opposition, either from within the government, or from the army or outside actors like parliament and press.⁹²

Designing a new foreign policy

If Nehru was a pivotal individual agent, the new foreign policy was also shaped within the structural framework of a newly independent developing country. As the Indian Union attained independence and awoke “to life and freedom” from the ashes of Great Britain’s Indian Empire, it was in a context of profound social and economic underdevelopment.⁹³ A central argument for independence had been to alleviate the Indian people of the oppressive poverty that had characterised colonial rule for most Indians.⁹⁴ The fight against poverty and socio-economic underdevelopment became a main priority for the new Indian National Congress government in 1947.⁹⁵ Indian foreign policy was designed in tandem with these socio-economic ambitions. India needed peace, stability and co-operation on the international level if it were to optimally focus its scarce resources on domestic development. Interpreted in this light, Indian foreign policy was to a considerable extent influenced by a *Primat der Innenpolitik*, a primacy of domestic politics in the sense of facilitating – not draining resources from – the country’s socio-economic development.⁹⁶

At the same time, the new foreign policy naturally also had to address the external challenges which the government faced. India’s strategic situation was highly demanding indeed. As a midnight’s child of 15 August 1947, independent India was born into a global framework of sharpening cold war and a regional setting of violent chaos following the break-up of the Indian Empire. By birth and national identity India and Pakistan were rivals, and tension was immediately brewing over painful territorial questions like the fate of Junagadh, Hyderabad and Kashmir.⁹⁷ Shortly after the human tragedies of partition and the massive

⁹² Holslag 2010: 35–36

⁹³ Yadav, Suriya Narain & Baghel, Indu (2009) *India’s Foreign Policy. Opportunities and Obstacles*, Global Vision Publishing House, New Delhi: 5. For Nehru’s iconic speech on India’s “tryst with destiny” see Iyengar, Uma (ed.) (2007) *The Oxford India Nehru*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi: 207–208

⁹⁴ Chandra, Mukherjee & Mukherjee 2008: 28–29

⁹⁵ Gopal 1979: 33

⁹⁶ See for example Brown 2004: 246; see also Nayar & Paul 2004: 129

⁹⁷ Kapur 2009: 48–49

exchanges of refugees, the two countries fought their first war over Kashmir in 1948. The basic conflict was however never resolved and would continue to bedevil Indo-Pakistani relations in the coming years. During the Bengali refugee crisis in 1950, Pakistan and India were once again at the brink of the precipice, although war was finally avoided.⁹⁸ As a result of this abiding hostility, Indian defence policy was chiefly oriented towards Pakistan until the war with China in 1962.⁹⁹

The texture of India's independence and the world views of its foreign policy élites were shaped by this challenging environment.¹⁰⁰ In fact, to some contemporaries, the future of the composite Indian Union itself seemed uncertain.¹⁰¹ The logical consequence in terms of foreign and defence policy was that India must seek to cultivate a peaceful and stable international framework permitting room for India's immediate and long term socio-economic development. Because of the financial constraints and developmental priorities of the government, the armed forces were relegated to limited budgets and resources. Both politically and economically, Nehru's government had higher priorities than strengthening, or even upholding, the military apparatus India had inherited from its imperial masters.¹⁰² This relative negligence should, however, also be understood in context of Nehru's holistic view on national defence. Defence was more than weapons and men; it also encompassed economic, industrial and mental dimensions.¹⁰³ Truly robust and credible defence would require an economically self-sufficient and a politically united India. Narrowly giving first priority to costly military procurements abroad would therefore constitute an inefficient approach to the larger challenge of building a strong Indian society capable of national defence.¹⁰⁴

However, while recognising the formidable challenges that lay before India, the Prime Minister also unhesitatingly envisaged India as a potential great power.¹⁰⁵ India's foreign policy was not exclusively going to cater to the endless labyrinth of immediate interests. It was also meant to facilitate a gradual metamorphosis from India's present avatar as a developing country into that of a great power in Asia and the world – a return to India's past as a civilisational power house.¹⁰⁶ In this respect, Nehru had a sense of the *longue durée* and

⁹⁸ Raghavan 2010: 177

⁹⁹ Raghavan 2010: 227; cf. Hoffmann 1990: 56–57

¹⁰⁰ See for example Ramachandra Guha and Sunil Khilnani's introduction in Raghavan 2010: vii

¹⁰¹ Guha 2008: xvi–xvii

¹⁰² Cohen 2002: 128

¹⁰³ Gopal 1979: 188

¹⁰⁴ Cohen 2002: 128

¹⁰⁵ Kapur 2009: 28; Nayar & Paul 2004: 157

¹⁰⁶ Nayar & Paul 2004: 127

of what can be understood as “grand strategy”.¹⁰⁷ An important vehicle for facilitating the transition would be a foreign policy independent of submissive cold war allegiances in favour of the United States or the Soviet Union. India was not to become a “pawn” in the hands of others. Instead, it would actively define its own independence and play a uniquely Indian role in world affairs. This guiding philosophy which eventually came to be known as non-alignment was to a large extent Nehru’s inspiration, and can in many respects be seen as a continuation of the struggle for independence.¹⁰⁸ By pursuing a “third way” New Delhi would preserve its recently won independence and diplomatic autonomy in the emerging conflict between the Western and Soviet blocs. At the same time India, as the “Light of Asia” and a beacon of anti-colonialism, could play a potentially significant role in the third world of emerging and developing states – all facing similar challenges in the nascent cold war order.

As a fundamental pillar of Indian foreign policy, non-alignment had both pragmatic and idealistic dimensions. By adopting a more nuanced approach to cold war international relations India was poised to act as an important intermediary between the two blocs – a diplomatic role the country was in fact also able to play in various forms, e.g. in the aftermath of the Korean War or during negotiations on French Indochina in Geneva, 1954.¹⁰⁹ Instead of passively being a pawn in the cold war, India would also be an eager spokesman for the emerging African and Asian nations and support these in their morally justified struggles for independence, development and national revival. In other terms, India could not only play an important and helpful role in the east-west conflict, but might equally be a global leader in a north-south perspective. On the other side, there were also purely pragmatic dimensions to non-alignment as a compass for India’s new foreign policy.¹¹⁰ For a newly independent country that was relatively weak in strategic and economic terms, non-alignment was deemed to be an affordable way of buying disproportionate international influence and a clear voice in

¹⁰⁷ Nayar & Paul discuss Nehru’s foreign policy in terms of “Grand Strategy”. Their point of departure is the political scientist Thomas Christensen’s definition of grand strategy as “the full package of domestic and international policies designed to increase national power and security. Grand strategy can therefore include policies varying from military expenditures and security alliances, to less frequently discussed policies, such as long-term investment in domestic industrialization and foreign aid to nations with common security concerns.” See Nayar & Paul 2004: 116–117. In this analysis the term will be used in a similar comprehensive sense as in Nayar & Paul’s book, but with an added emphasis on Nehru’s holistic understanding of foreign policy and national interests. John Lewis Gaddis has added that “grand strategy is an ecological discipline, in that it requires the ability to see how all of the parts of a problem relate to one another, and therefore to the whole thing.” Understood in this way, the concept can be especially helpful in distinguishing priorities between immediate and long term interests and hence facilitate an over-all understanding of actual foreign policy decisions vis-à-vis China in the period up to 1962.; see Gaddis, John Lewis (2009) *What Is Grand Strategy?*, consulted online (01.11.10) <http://www.duke.edu/web/agosp/grandstrategy.pdf>: 9

¹⁰⁸ Rothermund, Dietmar (2008) *Indien – Aufstieg einer asiatischen Weltmacht*, Verlag C. H. Beck, München: 64

¹⁰⁹ Kapur 2009: 43–44

¹¹⁰ Raghavan 2010: 20; Nayar & Paul 2004: 157

the world.¹¹¹ Furthermore, by refusing to side with only one of the superpowers, India could benefit from co-operation with both the United States and the Soviet Union, also in terms of technical expertise and foreign aid.¹¹² In their competition to court New Delhi, India might be able to enjoy benefits from both superpowers while at the same time holding the moral high ground by pursuing a "third way". A non-aligned foreign policy would, in brief, ensure that India in its present enfeebled incarnation could punch above its weight while at the same time enabling a gradual and natural return to India's historical weight class. India's early foreign policy was thus not only shaped by a constraining primacy of domestic politics, but was equally part and parcel of an ambitious vision of India's place in the world in the long run.¹¹³

Cultivating an Asian renaissance

The "third way" of non-alignment was a pillar of independent India's foreign policy; Sino-Indian friendship was in many respects a pillar of that third way.¹¹⁴ Indian China policy was a reflection of the ambitions Nehru harboured for his country. Already in 1939, before a visit to his friend Chiang Kai-shek, Nehru had spoken to a colleague of how he more and more thought "of China and India pulling together in the future".¹¹⁵ The vision was reformulated in 1946 when Nehru publicly announced that China would be one of the three most important countries in the world for India, besides the United States and the Soviet Union.¹¹⁶ As a resurgent Asian nation in India's relative vicinity, China would most likely have a large impact on India in the long run. This presumption was reinforced by his studies of world history.¹¹⁷ In its essentials, Nehru's vision of the relationship was anchored in two underlying strands of thought, deriving (a) from an inspiring set of ideas, and (b) from a notion of grand strategic realpolitik.

It has often been pointed out that Nehru's vision of Sino-Indian friendship was shaped by a strong dimension of idealism.¹¹⁸ His thinking on India-China relations drew inspiration and guidance from the realm of ideas to the extent that it built upon three fundamental perceptions. These perceptions were in broad terms firstly related to a glorification of Asia's

¹¹¹ Guha 2008: 179

¹¹² In 1951, for example, the Soviet Union offered India immediate aid and 50 000 tons of wheat while the US Congress was still debating an Indian request for food aid; Guha 2008: 162–163

¹¹³ Nayar & Paul 2004: 157

¹¹⁴ Garver 2001: 51

¹¹⁵ Nehru to S. K. Datta, 20 June 1939, quoted in Guha 2008: 152

¹¹⁶ Guha 2008: 153

¹¹⁷ See for example Nehru's interpretations of the Qing Empire in *Glimpses of World History*, Nehru 1939: 330–333

¹¹⁸ Nayar & Paul 2004: 115; Raghavan 2010: 1

past, secondly to a certain understanding of China and India as unique civilisational states and, thirdly, to an ideal of Asia as a larger family of nations with a common past and future.

Imperative among these ideas was the notion of China and India as the modern inheritors of magnificent cultural and historical traditions that had been interlinked by human, commercial and cultural bonds through millennia. The fruits of this interaction were evident in a variety of historical legacies.¹¹⁹ Among the most prominent examples were the spread of Buddhism from ancient India towards the North and the East, the impact of Indic art in East Asia and the remnants of the once flourishing southern route of the Silk Road. Nehru wrote of India being known as the "Noble Land" in China, but did not forget to add how one Chinese pilgrim, I-Tsing, had rhetorically asked if there were "any one, in the five parts of India, who does not admire China?"¹²⁰ Such fragments of a rich and colourful past could not only instil a sense of common pride in historical India-China relations, but could additionally be an inspiring precursor to the future. From the desk of his colonial prison in Ahmadnagar Fort, Nehru poetically observed that

now the wheel of fate has turned full circle and again India and China look towards each other and past memories crowd in their minds; again pilgrims of a new kind cross or fly over the mountains that separate them, bringing their messages of cheer and good-will and creating fresh bonds of friendship that will endure.¹²¹

To Nehru, Indian independence was part of a wider Asian resurgence.¹²² Independence seemed to promise a renaissance, a rebirth of the old grandeur in a modern avatar. As the Maoists ended the chaos of civil war and stabilised China in a centralised one-party state in 1949, the scene would appear to be set for a new chapter of comprehensive Sino-Indian interaction. The idealised past would be a blueprint for the future – an inspiring symbol of what India and China could achieve together, and a testimony to the idea of Asia as more than a geographical term; "the old continent is waking up after her long slumber. The eyes of the world are upon her, for everyone knows that Asia is going to play a great part in the future."¹²³ Nehru's wheel of fate had turned full circle again.

The second element that informed Nehru's ideal vision of India-China relations was the belief that the two Asian giants were the modern inheritors of civilisations that were unique and different from the western experience. Hence, their international relations would

¹¹⁹ See Sen, Amartya (2005) *The Argumentative Indian. Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity*, Penguin Books, London: 161–190

¹²⁰ Nehru 1947: 157

¹²¹ Nehru 1947: 159–160

¹²² Guha 2008: 153

¹²³ Nehru 1939: 10

also follow a distinct pattern. There was a “new approach, which might be called broadly an Asian approach.”¹²⁴ Nehru hoped that the time may come “when this ancient land will attain its rightful place in the world and make its full swing to the phenomenon of world peace and the welfare of mankind.”¹²⁵ Despite the fact that new China was headed by a communist government, Nehru was of the opinion that it would be no less “Asian” or “Chinese” than before and that the Maoists should be regarded as such rather than as obedient members of a global communist bloc.¹²⁶ Together, China and India, with their distinct civilisational heritage, would offer a more humane and sophisticated Asian alternative to the cold war vision of international relations.¹²⁷ To Nehru, the Asians “are nationalistic, but this nationalism seeks no dominion over, or interference with, others. They welcome all attempts at world co-operation and the establishment of an international order.”¹²⁸ Speaking to Asian delegates in New Delhi, March 1947, he further stated that “the whole spirit and outlook of Asia are peaceful, and the emergence of Asia in world affairs will be a powerful influence for world peace.”¹²⁹ The view of China and India as different from the power politics of the western world was also implicitly incorporated in the Sino-Indian agreement of 1954, which in a narrow sense pertained to the renunciation of Indian privileges in Tibet. The rhetorically and philosophically important part of the agreement, however, lay in *Panchsheel*,* the five principles which were included in the preamble and by the name of which the agreement is generally known. These principles were (i) mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty, (ii) mutual non-aggression, (iii) mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs, (iv) equality and mutual benefit, and (v) peaceful co-existence.¹³⁰ *Panchsheel* would develop into a general guideline of both Indian and Chinese foreign policies, and would later also be adopted by the movement of non-aligned states. Its inception has widely come to be seen as the high tide of Sino-Indian cordiality.¹³¹ The period immediately

¹²⁴ Nehru's reply to debate in Lok Sabha on the President's Address, February 18, 1958, in: Nehru, Jawaharlal (1961) *India's Foreign Policy. Selected Speeches, September 1946 – April 1961*, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, New Delhi

¹²⁵ From Nehru's reply to debate on the Objectives Resolution in the Constituent Assembly, January 22, 1947, in Nehru: 1961; see also Kapur 2009: 28

¹²⁶ Brown 2004: 267; letter from Nehru to V. L. Pandit dated 30 August 1950, in: subject file 60, 1st instalment, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit Papers, NMML

¹²⁷ Gopal 1979: 139

¹²⁸ Nehru 1947: 463

¹²⁹ Inaugural address (*Asia Finds Herself again*) at the Asian Relations Conference, New Delhi, March 23, 1947, in: Nehru 1961

* *Panchashīla* (पंचशील) means “five rules of conduct” in Sanskrit

¹³⁰ Sino-Indian Agreement on Tibet, 29 April 1954, in: India. Lok Sabha Secretariat (1959) *Foreign Policy of India – Texts of Documents 1947–1959*, Lok Sabha Secretariat, New Delhi

¹³¹ Garver, John W. (2010) *Evolution of India's China Policy*, in, Ganguly, Sumit (ed.) (2010) *India's Foreign Policy*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi: 87–88

succeeding the 1954 agreement has generally been summarised under the popular Indian slogan “*Hindi-Chini bhai-bhai*”.¹³² Panchsheel was perceived by Nehru and others as a powerful symbol of an alternative Asian approach to world affairs, deeply anchored in India’s intellectual history.¹³³ It was one important step towards the ultimate goal for which Nehru expressed both fervent desire and genuine belief: world peace.¹³⁴ China was, in brief, a natural partner for India in fostering a new and better Asia.¹³⁵

Thirdly, the vision of Sino-Indian relations was part and parcel of a wider mental outlook of pan-Asianism. The idea of an Asian community was nourished by the cultural and historical perceptions of Nehru in which India had served as a natural linchpin between South-East, Central and West Asia.¹³⁶ At the time of independence, he even thought in terms of some kind of future Asian federation.¹³⁷ In his opinion, “conditions and problems differ greatly in the various countries of Asia, but throughout this vast area, in China and India, in South-East Asia, in western Asia and the Arab world run common threads of sentiment and invisible links which hold them together.”¹³⁸ These links were on the one hand based on past interaction, eloquently illustrated by the spread of Buddhism from India or the rise of Islam in Asia in general, but the links were also a product of the shared experience and resistance to colonialism. The Asian Relations Conference in March 1947 incarnated the pan-Asian atmosphere and laid the foundation for strengthening co-operation between the emerging Asian states. In Delhi’s 16th century Purana Qila, Nehru presided at the conference and forcefully exclaimed the imminent arrival of a new epoch in Asian and world history:

We stand at the end of an era and on the threshold of a new period of history. Standing on this watershed which divides two epochs of human history and endeavour, we can look back on our long past and look forward to the future that is taking shape before our eyes ... Asia is again finding herself.¹³⁹

¹³² Acharya 2008: 27. *Hindī-Chīnī Bhāī-Bhāī* (हिन्दी-चीनी भाई-भाई) is Hindi for “Indians and Chinese are brothers” (literally: Indian-Chinese, brother-brother).

¹³³ See Nehru’s speech on *The Concept of Panchsheel* at civic reception to Mr. Bulganin and Mr. Khrushchev, Calcutta, November 30, 1955, in: Nehru 1961

¹³⁴ Brown 2004: 256; Kapur 2009: 28; Nehru’s statement in Lok Sabha, April 30, 1955, in: Nehru 1961

¹³⁵ Brown 2004: 317

¹³⁶ Jawaharlal Nehru’s speech in the Constituent Assembly of India, 8 March, 1949, in: Appadorai, A. (ed.) (1982) *Select Documents on India’s Foreign Policy and Relations 1947–1972*, Vol. I, Oxford University Press, New Delhi

¹³⁷ Gopal 1979: 55; Chung, Tan (1998) *Nehru’s Dream of an Eastern Federation*, in: Mansingh, Surjit (ed.) (1998) *Nehru’s Foreign Policy, Fifty Years On*, Mosaic Books, New Delhi

¹³⁸ Nehru 1947: 463

¹³⁹ Inaugural address (*Asia Finds Herself again*) at the Asian Relations Conference, New Delhi, March 23, 1947, in: Nehru 1961

In this new Asia, India would play a role which bespoke its geographical, cultural and historical centrality.¹⁴⁰ India would, to some extent, help Asia to find herself again by facilitating Asian co-operation.¹⁴¹ The idea of an Asian collective, a family of nations so to say, aspiring for a renaissance was reconfirmed during the Afro-Asian Conference in the Javanese city of Bandung in April 1955. So was Nehru's understanding of India's prominent place in the Asian family. The Indian Prime Minister played a leading role at the conference and not only stressed the global importance of the philosophy of Panchsheel, but also proactively sought to introduce China to the Afro-Asian community.¹⁴² Nehru gravely concluded in the final session of the conference that "we came here as agents of historic destiny and we have made history. (...) I hope we shall be worthy of the people's faith and our destiny."¹⁴³ Pan-Asianism, India and China's special role in the world and the grandeur of the past thus fused into a potent sense of idealism. It was in a way India's destiny to cultivate a strong friendship with China.

On the other hand, Nehruvian visions of India-China relations also had a distinct realist dimension. The desire for friendly relations with the "Middle Kingdom" was not fuelled by idealism and historical revivalism alone. It was also the outcome of a political calculation in view of India's practical long-term interests. This calculation related principally to India and Asia's need for development, to India and China's pivotal geopolitical position in Asia and, finally, to the importance of actively including the young People's Republic in the global community. Considered together, these three elements were part of Nehru's grand strategic objective of a stable and peaceful Asia in which India could prosper and realise its full potential. Sino-Indian friendship would furthermore help reduce the risk for a cataclysmic third world war.

The Asian countries were initially not directly linked to the emerging superpower conflict, but could potentially become involved in it as camp followers. Nehru repeatedly warned of Asia being drawn into Europe's internal history "full of conflicts, trouble and hatred".¹⁴⁴ The continent must rather make a positive contribution on the global level, for as Nehru told his fellow leaders at the Asian Relations Conference, "there can be no peace

¹⁴⁰ Jawaharlal Nehru's speech in the Constituent Assembly of India, 8 March, 1949, in: Appadorai 1982

¹⁴¹ Jawaharlal Nehru's speech (*Beginning of a New Outlook*) at the Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi, March 22, 1949, in: Nehru 1961

¹⁴² Garver 2001: 118

¹⁴³ Speech at the concluding session of the Asian-African Conference at Bandung, April 24, 1955, in: Nehru 1961

¹⁴⁴ See for example his speech (*Asia and Africa Awake*) at the concluding session of the Asian-African Conference at Bandung, Indonesia, April 24, 1955, in: Nehru 1961

unless Asia plays her part.”¹⁴⁵ The rationale for an Asian approach was also reflected in India’s immediate and tangible interests. Keeping Asia free from great power politicking was seen to be imperative for the cause of social and economic development. The two issues were intimately connected, for if India and other Asian countries were to engage in expensive “high” politics, it would probably drain their scarce resources away from development and so-called “low” politics. To Nehru, “the problems of Asia today are essentially problems of supplying what may be called the primary human necessities. They are not problems which may be called problems of power politics.”¹⁴⁶ At the Asian Relations Conference in 1947, the delegates were reminded how peace and freedom “have to be considered in both their political and economic aspects. The countries of Asia we must remember are very backward and the standards of living are appallingly low. These economic problems demand urgent solution or else crisis and disaster may overwhelm us.”¹⁴⁷ Despite being considered a relatively strong Asian country in terms of size and potential, India was no exception.¹⁴⁸ Around 80 percent of its citizens were rural and illiterate and the country was mired in deep social conservatism. Nehru reminded his diplomats that India was a poor agricultural country barely able to feed its own people.¹⁴⁹ The Chinese people, he told a million of his countrymen at a speech in 1954, also desired peace and development rather than conflicts and war.¹⁵⁰ Seen from a development perspective, cultivating Asian co-operation and keeping cold war rivalries out of Asia was therefore more than a matter of principle or ideas – it was understood to be a core interest for both India and China as developing states.

Asian co-operation seemed dependent on Sino-Indian friendship. The relevance of India and China in Asia was not only an historical and cultural reflection of the civilisations they embodied, but was also a result of their massive size, geographical centrality, large population and considerable power potential. They were the pivotal actors of the continent, vaguely comparable to France and Germany on the European continent. The cultivation of a strong friendship with China was thus also based on a notion of realism in the sense that China was seen as the other major power in Asia. Considering that India had a northern frontier of more than 2000 miles in the Himalayas, the importance of friendly relations with

¹⁴⁵ Inaugural address (*Asia Finds Herself again*) at the Asian Relations Conference, New Delhi, March 23, 1947, in: Nehru 1961

¹⁴⁶ Speech (*Beginning of a New Outlook*) delivered at the Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi, March 22, 1949, in: Nehru 1961

¹⁴⁷ Inaugural address (*Asia Finds Herself again*) at the Asian Relations Conference, New Delhi, March 23, 1947, in: Nehru 1961

¹⁴⁸ See for example Nayar & Paul 2004: 130

¹⁴⁹ Nayar & Paul 2004: 129

¹⁵⁰ Guha 2008: 171

the neighbour-giant seemed all the more pregnant.¹⁵¹ In a note of 18 January 1950, Nehru warned his Deputy Prime Minister that if India were to develop a strained relationship or a rivalry of some sort with its northern twin,

Pakistan [our major possible enemy] will undoubtedly try to take advantage of this, politically or otherwise. The position of India thus will be bad from a defence point of view. We cannot have all the time two possible enemies on either side of India (...) strategically we would be in an unsound position and the burden of this will be very great on us. As it is, we are facing enormous difficulties, financial, economic, etc.¹⁵²

The potential opening of a second front, with the crippling expenditures of establishing a credible Himalayan defence, would combine with India's already existent strategic and economic challenges and provide a numbing blow to Nehru's ambitious development programmes. Furthermore, in a worst case scenario India might risk getting caught in a strategically exhausting pincer movement between hostile Pakistan and an increasingly powerful China. A good relationship on the other hand, would presumably leave India's long northern back free from trouble and thus permit the government to focus its attention on the strategic challenge of Pakistan and other problems. Cordial India-China relations were therefore seen to be in India's national interest "not only in the immediate future but from a long term view."¹⁵³ In fact, Nehru reckoned good relations between China and India to be paramount for the surrounding world in general:

If their relations are bad, this will have a serious effect not only on both of them but on Asia as whole. It would affect our future for a long time. If a position arises in which China and India are inveterately hostile to each other, like France and Germany, then there will be repeated wars bringing destruction to both. The advantage will go to other countries. It is interesting to note that both the UK and the USA appear to be anxious to add to the unfriendliness of India and China towards each other. It is also interesting to find that the USSR does not view with favour any friendly relations between India and China. These are long term reactions which one can fully understand, because India and China at peace with each other would make a vast difference to the whole set-up and balance of the world.¹⁵⁴

These prospects were of such far-reaching importance for India that Nehru thought it imperative to foster a cordial relationship between the two giants. "I think on the whole that China desires this too for obvious reasons."¹⁵⁵ Briefly put, there were strong negative

¹⁵¹ Gopal 1979: 139

¹⁵² Nehru formally addressed the note to his Chief Ministers, but it is widely seen as an indirect reply to Deputy Prime Minister Vallabhbhai Patel's stark warning of new China as a threat to Indian security (mainly as a result of its attack on Tibet) in a personal letter written to the Prime Minister on 7 November 1950. Both Patel's letter and Nehru's note can be accessed in Patel 1974: 335–347

¹⁵³ Nehru's note on China and Tibet, 18 November 1950 in Patel 1974: 343

¹⁵⁴ Nehru's note on China and Tibet, 18 November 1950 in Patel 1974: 345

¹⁵⁵ Nehru's note on China and Tibet, 18 November 1950 in Patel 1974: 346

incentives not to co-operate with China and equally positive incentives to befriend China – a friendship which, as argued, also had strong ideological components in a resurgent Asia.

Nonetheless, one would ignore the more subtle aspects of Nehru's thinking on the People's Republic by uniformly castigating him as a naïve optimist or as an "unabashed panda hugger".¹⁵⁶ This has repeatedly been done, especially after the breakdown of his China policy, and the war of 1962, and has led to a series of historical caricatures and stereotypes. The equation does have another side. In a secret and personal letter written in 1950 to his sister and ambassador in Washington DC, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, he pointed out that "I am sure that it is of great importance to Asia and to the world that India and China should be friendly. How far we shall succeed in this endeavour, I cannot say."¹⁵⁷ It is important to emphasise that Nehru did not take a friendly China for granted. But he consistently stressed the grand strategic importance of a friendly China for India. In analytical terms these are two separate positions; the logical outcome was an active effort to cultivate a friendly China. Through his studies of political history Nehru had reached the conclusion that China very much had an *alter ego*, that of an imperious Middle Kingdom surrounded by a periphery of tributary states. In periods of unity and strength, China would be vital and would have a "somewhat inherent tendency to expand."¹⁵⁸ In 1949 China emerged from the shadows of war and a "century of humiliation" under the banner of a strong, but unpredictable Maoist central government. Nehru acknowledged that the development of new China was "anybody's guess" and did not rule out tendencies of nationalism and geopolitical assertiveness.¹⁵⁹ In light of this interpretation, the alleged liberation of Tibet was no cardinal anomaly in Nehru's analysis of China. Nor was China's involvement in the Korean War or the Formosa question. The fundamental point for Nehru was, firstly, that the new Chinese leadership like India had significant challenges in terms of low social and economic development. Secondly, he reckoned that new China could be conditioned to modern ways of international co-operation and diplomacy if the surrounding world adopted a benign approach to the regime.¹⁶⁰ The revolutionary leaders of China had risen to power in a civil war and needed time and

¹⁵⁶ Chellaney, Brahma (2007) *Asian Juggernaut: The Rise of China, India and Japan*, HarperCollins, New Delhi: 160; see also Shourie 2008

¹⁵⁷ Letter from Nehru to V. L. Pandit dated 30 August 1950, in: subject file 60, 1st instalment, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit Papers, NMML

¹⁵⁸ This point of view was publicly formulated as bilateral relations strained in 1959; see Nehru's reply to debate in Lok Sabha, November 27, 1959, in: Nehru 1961. Nevertheless, the idea was present long before; see for example the internal government note of 18 November 1950 in Patel 1974: 345; see also Gopal, Sarvepalli (1984) *Jawaharlal Nehru: A Biography*, Vol. III: 1956–1964, Jonathan Cape, London: 275

¹⁵⁹ Gopal 1984: 275; Letter from Nehru to V. L. Pandit dated 30 August 1950, in: subject file 60, 1st instalment, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit Papers, NMML

¹⁶⁰ Gopal 1984: 275

assistance to integrate in the international community. India could therefore reassume its ancient role as a bridge between cultures and civilisations. As an Asian nation and a liberal democracy it could help “interpret” new China to the critical West, while also encouraging the PRC’s integration in the international community.¹⁶¹ By stimulating China to become a responsible international stake-holder and a member of the Asian family of nations, India could help undermine any potential resurgence of expansionism. Nehru thus sought a policy of carrots rather than sticks, fearing that the latter would have a self-defeating effect. Indeed, the “tragedy of the situation” was that the US policy of isolating the newborn People’s Republic “is the one policy which will make China do what the US least want.”¹⁶² New Delhi on the other hand would proactively project China in the international society, a benign policy which was manifested at several occasions during the 1950s in forums as varied as international conferences, the Commonwealth and the UN.¹⁶³ Among the non-socialist countries, India was second only to Burma in formally recognising the PRC, despite US protests and despite Nehru’s personal friendship with the then marginalised Chiang Kai-shek.¹⁶⁴ In Bandung 1955 Nehru saw it as India’s responsibility to present China to the Asian-African conference and personally introduced premier Zhou Enlai to other delegates.¹⁶⁵ India’s bridge building function was even more visible vis-à-vis the United States. Despite the detriment to Indo-US relations, India advocated the People’s Republic’s claim to represent China within the UN and also took on a negotiating role in the aftermath of the Korean War. The anticipated positive long term effect on China and the enhancement of Sino-Indian relations generally outweighed the immediate cost of estranging the United States.¹⁶⁶ When the US State Department suggested that India should take China’s place in the United Nations Security Council Nehru categorically refused to accept the idea. It was not that he did not desire India to sit in the council – in fact he argued that India was entitled to a permanent membership – but he refused to let this happen at the cost of China. He instructed his ambassador in Washington DC to indicate to the Americans that it “would be bad from every point of view. It would be a clear affront to China and it would mean some kind of break between us and China (...) We shall go on pressing for China’s admission in the UN and the

¹⁶¹ See Kapur 2009: 41–42

¹⁶² Letter from Nehru to V. L. Pandit dated 30 August 1950, in: subject file 60, 1st instalment, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit Papers, NMML

¹⁶³ Kapur 2009: 41

¹⁶⁴ Deepak, B. R. (2005) *India & China 1904-2004. A Century of Peace and Conflict*, Manak, New Delhi: 119

¹⁶⁵ Garver 2001: 118

¹⁶⁶ See Brown 2004: 256–257; Gopal 1979: 138; Akbar 2008: 493–494

Security Council.”¹⁶⁷ Nehru thus refused to let a potential short-term gain frustrate his long-term grand strategy of pursuing Sino-Indian friendship in a new and peaceful Asia. The way to reach that goal lay in cultivating an internationalist China by means of inclusiveness. This would help enable Asia’s two major states to focus on their true challenges – internal development issues – while also strengthening the prospects for peace, stability and non-alignment in Asia at large. Sino-Indian friendship was, in short, a prioritised national interest for India, also from a realist point of view. It was part of Nehru’s grand strategy.

Visions of greatness

In sum, it is imperative to keep in mind the general context in which the new Indian China policy was formulated. The Government of India was first and foremost led by a *Primat der Innenpolitik* in which the social and economic development of post-colonial India was emphasised. When it came to external affairs, Pakistan and the superpowers were the immediate challenges for New Delhi. Indian relations with China were primarily structured by a grand strategic view of India’s long term interests and potential. It would be a relationship that in many respects expressed the optimism of independence and the desire to cultivate a peaceful and prosperous Asia. Nehru’s early vision of Sino-Indian relations was based on a notion of idealism in the sense that it was a symbol and a continuation of a magnificent common past. The idea of India and China as unique civilisational states and the conception of Asia as a family of nations were also central components in the desire to forge a strong friendship with Beijing. But there were nevertheless shades and nuances to Nehru’s idealist thinking. Sino-Indian cordiality was also considered to be in India’s interests from a realist point of view. This was not least a function of the massive size and pivotal position of the two states in Asia. Friendly co-operation between the two giants was seen as important in order to secure a peaceful and stable Asia in which they both could focus on their pressing domestic challenges. Last but not least, Nehru thought it crucial to include and integrate the revolutionary Chinese government as far as possible in international society to discourage unilateralism. The motivations underlying early Indian China policy were thus complex, but consistently illustrated the sense of long-term importance Nehru attached to the relationship. Neatly defining Nehru as an idealist or a realist in his China policy may miss the point.¹⁶⁸ In fact Nehru himself defined idealism as the “realism of tomorrow” and added that “the realist,

¹⁶⁷ Letter from Nehru to V. L. Pandit dated 30 August 1950, in: subject file 60, 1st instalment, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit Papers, NMML

¹⁶⁸ Brown 2004: 246; Müller, Harald (2007) *Weltmacht Indien. Wie uns der rasante Aufstieg herausfordert*, Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, Frankfurt am Main: 54; see also Raghavan, who strikes a balance and discusses Nehru in terms of the slightly nebulous concept “liberal realism”, 2010: 14–17

looks at the tip of his nose and sees little beyond; the result is that he is stumbling all the time.”¹⁶⁹ The Prime Minister's sense of time, in short, extended beyond his own present.

(ii) *Tabula rasa*? The Great Game revisited

Nehruvian China policy sought to bring new life to the past glories of Sino-Indian relations by building a profoundly modern bilateral friendship. The one historical period the new relationship was not consciously supposed to reflect was the colonial era. Nevertheless, the refutation of the colonial legacy was in many respects artificial. The Raj had not only shaped the political and institutional life of independent India, but had also given it a distinct geographic framework and a modern western notion of statehood. In the midst of the effort to create a new relationship with China, India was thus bound by the heritage of its colonial past. So indeed was China, which in 1949 emerged from national humiliation and "unequal treaties" as a revisionist state intent on re-establishing Beijing's authority in the Middle Kingdom.¹⁷⁰ Especially two factors contributed to revive the shadows of the imperial past; Tibet and the Himalayan frontiers.

The Tibetan question

The idea of India and China as geographic neighbours is quite modern. Geopolitically, the historical relations between India and China have been shaped by the fact that they were separated by the highest mountain range in the world. In addition to the towering Himalayas, there was a vast distance between the heartlands in the plains of Northern India and Eastern China's Pacific rimland. In between them lay the mountainous and sparsely populated area of Tibet. Before the first invasion by the People's Republic in 1950, Tibet had a history as an independent country for considerable periods of time. In historical terms, it is hence more appropriate to speak of an Indo-Tibetan frontier rather than a Sino-Indian one. The term is not only geographically more accurate, but is also reinforced by the fact that Tibet had a cultural, ethnic, economic and political profile which distinguished the country from its giant neighbours. But there were also links. In cultural and linguistic terms, Tibet faced southwards rather than to the Chinese east. In Nehru's view, "Tibet, culturally speaking, is an offshoot of India."¹⁷¹ As a result of the cultural proximity, "[t]here is this feeling of kinship, if I may use that word, cultural kinship between the people of India and the people of Tibet."¹⁷² Politically

¹⁶⁹ Extracts from Jawaharlal Nehru's speech in Parliament, 7 December, 1950, in: Appadorai 1982

¹⁷⁰ See Garver 2001: 14, 35

¹⁷¹ Nehru in Lok Sabha, April 5, 1959, quoted in Garver 2001: 41

¹⁷² Nehru in Lok Sabha, March 30, 1959, quoted in Garver 2001: 40. As Nehru made these pronouncements to an aroused assembly of parliamentarians, a major revolt against the Chinese central authorities was taking place

however, Tibet was connected more to the east than to India. It nurtured important political links with Imperial China already in the 7th century, although it was not until the 18th century that Beijing imposed its rule in the country.¹⁷³ Nevertheless, imperial rule was not direct and generally gave room for considerable Tibetan autonomy.¹⁷⁴ It was not possible – at this point in time – to speak of Chinese “sovereignty” in a Westphalian sense of the term. Rather the relationship has been described loosely as “suzerainty” in Western vocabulary.¹⁷⁵ Beijing’s influence in the country waxed and waned constantly until the balance tilted markedly in Lhasa’s favour after the tumultuous fall of the Qing dynasty. By 1913 and until the PRC’s invasion in 1950, Tibet was practically speaking an independent country which to some extent formulated foreign policy.¹⁷⁶ This de facto independence was not least expressed at the Simla conference (1913–1914) when China and Tibet sent separate diplomatic representatives to negotiate with the colonial Government of India.¹⁷⁷ Tibet’s diplomatic personality was also strengthened by its participation at the Asian Relations conference in New Delhi, March 1947.¹⁷⁸ On both occasions, the Tibetan presence was met with protests from various Chinese authorities. Nevertheless, the mere fact that Lhasa represented itself internationally and that Beijing had marginal or no influence in Tibet, testifies to the claim that Tibet was de facto independent of China in the period from the disintegration of the Qing Empire till the Maoist invasion of 1950–1951.

British India on the other hand exercised considerable influence in Tibet. As British influence expanded and consolidated in South Asia, the need to secure the riches of the Indian Empire from external threats became more pregnant. India was the “jewel in the crown” and a nerve centre of Britain’s global empire. During the course of the 19th century, British Indian strategists therefore nervously watched tsarist Russia’s expansion in Central Asia. As Russia progressively approached the northern frontiers of India, there was an increasingly strong

in Tibet. According to John W. Garver, Nehru originally had an ambiguous attitude to semi-feudal theocratic Tibet; his views seem to have changed following the revolt in 1959 and the agitated popular atmosphere in India. Despite Nehru’s political ambivalence, however, Tibet was recognised to be within India’s cultural sphere of influence right from 1947; see Garver 2001: 40, 14–15 (see map 1.1)

¹⁷³ Guruswamy & Singh 2009: 45; Mehra, Parshotam (1990) *The Elusive Triangle: Tibet in India-China Relations – A Brief Conspectus*, in: Mehra, Parshotam (ed.) (2007) *Essays in Frontier History: India, China and the Disputed Border*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi: 112; see also: Spence, Jonathan D. (1999) *The Search for Modern China*, W. W. Norton & Co., New York: 68

¹⁷⁴ See for example Hopkirk, Peter (1982/2006) *Trespassers on the Roof of the World: The Race for Lhasa*, John Murray, London: 2, 58

¹⁷⁵ Suzerainty implied limited or weak Chinese authority permitting considerable room for both Tibetan autonomy and foreign (British Indian) influence. Garver 2001: 34–35

¹⁷⁶ Garver 2001: 42; Guruswamy & Singh 2009: 43; Spence 1999: 426

¹⁷⁷ Guruswamy & Singh 2009: 28

¹⁷⁸ Guha 2008: 153; Garver 2001: 44

apprehension in the colonial government that it could be threatened from the north.¹⁷⁹ At the closest, the Russian outposts in the Pamir region were only twenty miles away from the Indian frontier – a remarkable feat given that the distance had been around 2000 miles at the beginning of the 19th century.¹⁸⁰ The Government of India responded by adopting various counter-strategies to the Russian thrust southwards. The consequential rivalry has been encapsulated in Rudyard Kipling’s novel *Kim* as the “Great Game”, or, more poetically, as a “tournament of shadows” in Russian.¹⁸¹ From Calcutta’s perspective the gist of the Great Game lay in securing the geopolitical integrity of the subcontinent.¹⁸² In broad terms, there were two approaches shaping British thinking; the “forward school” and the so-called “backward school” – also known as the approach of “masterly inactivity”.¹⁸³ Whereas the latter adopted a reactive approach to the defence of India – considering the existent borderlands of India sufficiently remote and secure to defend the heartlands – the former recommended a more proactive and expansive “forward” strategy. The wording “forward policy” is in itself a product of the Great Game, and is strongly associated with India’s activist Viceroy, Lord Curzon (1899–1905).¹⁸⁴ An idea central to the forward school was the concept of adopting protective buffers around India. There were inner and outer circles forming a *cordon sanitaire* around the edges of the subcontinent.¹⁸⁵ In the outer circle were areas geographically adjacent to India such as Persian Baluchistan, Afghanistan and Tibet. In order to secure India, it was necessary to have a certain control of these buffers. More precisely, it was deemed critical that Russia did not exercise influence in the outer circle. The British feared that Russia would exploit China’s weak presence in Tibet and then possibly project power on to the Indian plains from there. Inspired by a very real sense of concern, the colonial Government of India therefore adopted an interventionist policy in Tibet.¹⁸⁶ British India did not control Tibet directly, but made sure that its security interests were respected and also acquired a series of extra-territorial privileges in the country. Thus, the leitmotif in British India’s Tibet policy was not to expel the decaying Qing Empire, but to contain the expansion of Russian power. A modicum of Chinese presence, or at the very least a formal Chinese

¹⁷⁹ Garver 2001: 35

¹⁸⁰ Hopkirk, Peter (1990/2006) *The Great Game*, John Murray, London: 5

¹⁸¹ Hopkirk 1990/2006: 1, 5; see Kipling, Rudyard (1901/2009) *Kim*, Hachette India, Gurgaon

¹⁸² Calcutta was the capital of British India from 1858 to 1911.

¹⁸³ Hopkirk 1990/2006: 6

¹⁸⁴ Rajamohan 2003: 207

¹⁸⁵ Hopkirk 1982/2006: 56

¹⁸⁶ The Younghusband expedition of 1904 is one example of armed British intervention in Tibet, see Hopkirk 1982/2006: 159-183; see also Jacob, Jain T. (2008) *Shaping a ‘New Forward Policy’: Tibet and India’s Options*, IPCS Issue Brief, No. 63, 2008, Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, New Delhi: 1

suzerainty in the area, was considered beneficial to British interests in order to keep the Russians out of Tibet. According to the Viceroy Lord Lansdowne, “the stronger we can make China (...) the more useful will she be to us as an obstacle to Russian advance.”¹⁸⁷ China was therefore, in contrast to the situation in its former possessions in Vietnam, Mongolia or Korea, allowed to retain a nominal claim on Tibet.¹⁸⁸ But when push came to shove, the Tibetans were *de facto* independent under British Indian influence.

The buffer policy of nurturing an independent, but impotent Lhasa under nominal Chinese suzerainty continued up to India’s independence. In fact, early independent India’s Tibet policy can largely be seen in continuity with the colonial government’s approach.¹⁸⁹ India did not only inherit the extra-territorial privileges of the Raj in Tibet, it also continued to consolidate Tibetan independence by for instance inviting separate Chinese and Tibetan delegations to the Asian Relations conference in Delhi 1947. Although explicit buffer policies were discredited by the anti-colonial ethos in the wake of independence, the British High Commissioner in New Delhi reported to his government that the new Indian government largely continued to follow the “forward” logic of supporting an autonomous Tibet.¹⁹⁰ On the other hand, there were also marked ruptures. India did not fear Moscow’s influence in Tibet like the British in India had. Nor was China, still mired in civil war, considered to be a potential challenger to India in 1947. Nehru instead saw China as a crucial partner for India in building a peaceful and prosperous post-colonial Asia. In Nehru’s grand strategic perspective India’s relationship with Tibet was of minor importance compared to the centrality of Sino-Indian friendship.

By 1949, India was thus effectively following two separate policies of friendship; one towards Lhasa and another towards Beijing. The independent Government of India, it would seem, sought the best of both worlds. The subsequent development of Indo-Tibetan relations was largely the product of a dilemma. On the one hand, there was the desire for continued Tibetan autonomy and, implicitly, for a predictable, impotent neighbour as had been the case in and before 1947; on the other hand there was the urge not to alienate new China over comparatively minor issues. The dilemma was clearly visible in New Delhi’s handling of the Chinese invasion of Tibet in October 1950. India at first mildly protested against China’s violent course of action by sending three diplomatic notes.¹⁹¹ They sought to remind Beijing

¹⁸⁷ Lord Lansdowne, 28 September 1889, quoted in Guruswamy & Singh 2009: 14–15

¹⁸⁸ Garver 2001: 34

¹⁸⁹ Garver 2001: 43

¹⁹⁰ See Garver 2001: 43–44

¹⁹¹ Garver 2001: 46

of Tibet's traditional autonomy and of the adverse consequences to the PRC's international reputation and potential entry in the UN – for which India lobbied actively. The Indian reaction was firmly rebuffed by Beijing as an interference with China's internal affairs and was followed by warnings that Tibet was no less than sovereign – not suzerain – Chinese territory.¹⁹² Nehru privately noted that “I think the Chinese have acted rather foolishly and done some injury to their cause. There is a strong feeling here of having been let down by them. Some people indeed are very angry” – but he simultaneously added that “I do not think all this is justified and we have to be careful not to overdo it.”¹⁹³ Nehru thought there was an overreaction in Indian public opinion. The bottom line was that “our general policy remains the same.”¹⁹⁴

Nevertheless, when the People's Liberation Army (PLA) forced the 14th Dalai Lama to sign the “Seventeen Point Agreement for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet” in 1951, India's geopolitical position had in fact been fundamentally altered. The buffer New Delhi had effectively inherited from the colonial government was irrevocably gone. It was the first time since 1793 that China had a major military presence in India's immediate vicinity.¹⁹⁵ Vallabhbhai Patel recognised the change and its potential consequences in a personal letter to the Prime Minister:

Throughout history we have seldom been worried about our north-east frontier. The Himalayas have been regarded as an impenetrable barrier against any threat from the north. We had a friendly Tibet which gave us no trouble. The Chinese were divided. (...) China is no longer divided. It is united and strong. (...) Chinese irredentism and Communist imperialism are different from the expansionism or imperialism of the Western Powers. The former has a cloak of ideology which makes it ten times more dangerous. In the guise of ideological expansion lie concealed racial, national or historical claims. (...) a new threat has developed from the north and north-east.¹⁹⁶

Patel also suggested a series of practical countermeasures and called for a general reconfiguration of India's China policy, and even non-alignment. In a reply formally addressed to the chief ministers Nehru acknowledged the geopolitical novelty of the situation, but apart from that dismissed Patel's analysis and policy recommendations:

we should be clear in our minds as to what we are aiming at, not only in the immediate future but from a long-term view. (...) In all probability China, that is present-day China, is going to be our close neighbour for a long time to come. We are going to have a tremendously long common

¹⁹² Garver 2001: 47

¹⁹³ Personal letter from Nehru to V. L. Pandit, ambassador in Washington DC, dated 1 November 1950, in: subject file 60, 1st instalment, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit Papers, NMML

¹⁹⁴ Personal letter from Nehru to V. L. Pandit, ambassador in Washington DC, dated 1 November 1950, in: subject file 60, 1st instalment, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit Papers, NMML

¹⁹⁵ Garver 2001: 41, 42

¹⁹⁶ Deputy PM Vallabhbhai Patel's personal letter to Nehru, 7 November 1950, in: Patel 1974: 337–338

frontier. (...) Therefore it is important to pursue a policy which will be in keeping with this long-term view.¹⁹⁷

Nehru considered it impossible for either India or any other country to stop China in Tibet. It was a mere fact that had to be accepted. His basic analysis was more or less the opposite of Patel's; the best way to secure India's interests in the new situation was not in confronting China, but in befriending it further. The original policy of co-operation with China was only strengthened by the fact that they were now becoming geographical neighbours. Therein lay New Delhi's greatest and most cost-effective source of influence – to the benefit of both India and Tibet.¹⁹⁸ Where Patel argued for a foreign policy reflecting what he considered to be India's immediate needs, Nehru advocated a policy adjusted to India's long-term grand strategic ambitions. He stressed the importance of interpreting and reacting to singular events in view of India's long-term policy interests; Patel emphasised that India's long-term policy interests must gradually be redefined in correlation with such singular events. The sense of time perspective and the manner of thinking in terms of ends and means were thus rather different between Nehru and Patel. So was the understanding of geography. Patel's Himalayas were no "impenetrable barrier" any more, whereas in Nehru's mind it was "inconceivable that [China] should divert its forces and its strength across the inhospitable terrain of Tibet and undertake a wild adventure across the Himalayas."¹⁹⁹ The Himalayas were still a natural barrier of defence, it would seem. In addition, a Chinese attack on India in the foreseeable future was "exceedingly unlikely" as it would "undoubtedly lead to world war".²⁰⁰ Briefly put, China would not and could not threaten India militarily from Tibet, and Tibetan autonomy could be secured more efficiently by influencing a friendly China than by antagonising it. Confrontation was the least beneficial outcome for all parts, especially in a long-term perspective.

Nehru's line of thinking prevailed. Patel passed away shortly after having formulated his warning and left the Prime Minister surrounded by political clients who did not substantially challenge his foreign policy deliberations.²⁰¹ The decision to cultivate Sino-Indian friendship despite the loss of the Tibetan buffer was brought ahead in the following years. A crescendo was reached in the form of the Sino-Indian agreement of 1954, by which India formally surrendered the extra-territorial rights it had inherited from the Indian Empire.

¹⁹⁷ Nehru's note on China and Tibet, 18 November 1950 in Patel 1974: 343

¹⁹⁸ Nehru's note on China and Tibet, 18 November 1950 in Patel 1974: 346

¹⁹⁹ Deputy PM Vallabhbhai Patel's personal letter to Nehru, 7 November 1950, in: Patel 1974: 337;

Nehru's note on China and Tibet, 18 November 1950 in Patel 1974: 344

²⁰⁰ Nehru's note on China and Tibet, 18 November 1950 in Patel 1974: 344

²⁰¹ Brown 2004: 245

The agreement formalised the Indian policy of accepting China's interests in Tibet and – most crucially – effectively acknowledged Chinese sovereignty over what was termed the “Tibet region of China”.²⁰² It is debatable precisely how Nehru and the Government of India understood this term. The word “autonomy” was not mentioned in the treaty, but according to Nehru himself he was ensured, and firmly believed, that Tibetan autonomy would be respected by Beijing and that Tibet was no regular province of China.²⁰³ Beijing, it seemed, would let the inhospitable mountain country alone once it was formally under Chinese sway. To Nehru, a de facto autonomous “Tibet region of China” would meet both Lhasa's concerns and Indian security apprehensions by reducing the need for strong Chinese presence in Tibet – and hence in India's vicinity.²⁰⁴ This however was not stated explicitly in the treaty. India therefore principally secured what could be understood as a psychological buffer, replacing Lord Curzon's geopolitical buffer in Tibet. This mental buffer was consolidated by the formulation of Panchsheel and by the friendly enthusiasm the agreement generated between New Delhi and Beijing; it was the beginning of the *Hindi-Chini bhai-bhai* period. The 1954 agreement, according to Nehru's thinking, removed “the last vestiges of suspicion” in India-China relations and opened the prospect for further strengthening the Sino-Indian partnership.²⁰⁵ The strategic need for agreement and co-operation between India and China was underlined when Pakistan in 1954 formally aligned with the United States and in that way, in Nehru's eyes, brought the cold war directly to South Asia. Post-imperial quarrels in Tibet could not come in the way of Beijing and New Delhi's partnership for an alternative world order.

The 1954 agreement thus seemed to promise China's friendship to India, but it did not guarantee such friendship in the same way that India had effectively guaranteed recognition of the “Tibet region of China”. Good bilateral relations were not legally binding, but were fundamentally political in nature. In hindsight, there has been a tendency to criticise Nehru for giving away too much – India's extra-territorial rights and its special relationship to Lhasa – for too little in return, i.e. temporary Chinese friendliness.²⁰⁶ On the other side, it is questionable whether Nehru had much choice in a situation where the geopolitical balance of power had already been altered in 1950. Interpreted from this perspective, the treaty of 1954

²⁰² Sino-Indian Agreement on Tibet, 29 April 1954, in: India. Lok Sabha Secretariat 1959

²⁰³ Garver 2001: 53

²⁰⁴ Garver 2001: 43, 51

²⁰⁵ Mullik 1971: 157; Brown 2004: 269

²⁰⁶ See Garver 2001: 52–53

only gave legal recognition to a *fait accompli* from 1950.²⁰⁷ Moreover, Nehru's expectations of Tibetan autonomy were in large measure confirmed by Beijing in the period up to and after 1954. Until internal unrest escalated seriously at the end of the 1950s – and especially with the revolt of 1959 – Tibet had a substantial degree of autonomy.²⁰⁸ When the Dalai Lama visited India in 1956 for the 2500th anniversary of the Buddha's birth, there were suggestions from other Tibetan leaders that he should stay on and work for Tibetan independence in co-operation with the Government of India. But Nehru declined and advised him to return and work constructively with Beijing, as an autonomous region within the PRC in line with the 17 point agreement of 1951.²⁰⁹ Nehru least of all wanted conflict in Tibet and was realist in the sense that he deemed it unfeasible for Tibet to break away from Beijing; a pragmatic political course was the only solution for Tibet, and by far the best alternative for India as a neighbouring country.

India's Tibetan policy of consolidating a psychological buffer of friendship was gradually challenged from the outbreak of the Tibetan Khampa rebellion onwards. By 1958 it was becoming known in India that the idea of an autonomous Tibet was not consonant with the harsh realities on the ground.²¹⁰ When China reacted to internal upheavals by severely tightening its military, political and economic grip, Nehru seemed to be left with broken promises and hopes of autonomy, but little more. By 1959, the last remnants of de facto Tibetan independence were crumbling while Chinese troops filled Curzon's strategic buffer zone. Beijing reacted strongly to all perceived Indian interference in Tibetan affairs, this being considered as internal affairs at least since 1950, and in Chinese eyes, formally recognised as such by India in 1954.²¹¹ The Chinese invasion in 1950 had altered the geopolitical scene and 1954 had politically confirmed the altered balance of power by giving recognition of China's interests in Tibet. The loss of Curzon's geopolitical buffer in 1950 and the gradual weakening of Nehru's psychological buffer by the end of the 1950s would indirectly present a major stumbling block to the Government of India's grand strategic vision

²⁰⁷ Guruswamy & Singh 2009: 56; Mehra, Parshotam (1956) *India, China and Tibet, 1950-4*, in, Mehra, Parshotam (ed.) (2007) *Essays in Frontier History: India, China and the Disputed Border*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi: 162

²⁰⁸ Garver 2001: 53

²⁰⁹ Garver 2001: 54

²¹⁰ Hopkirk 1982/2006: 253

²¹¹ John W. Garver emphasises Chinese suspicions of Indian intentions vis-à-vis Tibet as a root cause for China's decision for war in 1962. See Garver, John W. (2006) *China's Decision for War with India in 1962*, in, Johnston, Alastair Iain & Ross, Robert J. (eds.) (2006) *New Directions to the Study of China's Foreign Policy*, Stanford University Press, Stanford: 86–130

of India-China co-operation. The problem would acquire a more direct nature in combination with another issue, the undefined territorial limits between Tibet and India.

From frontiers to borders

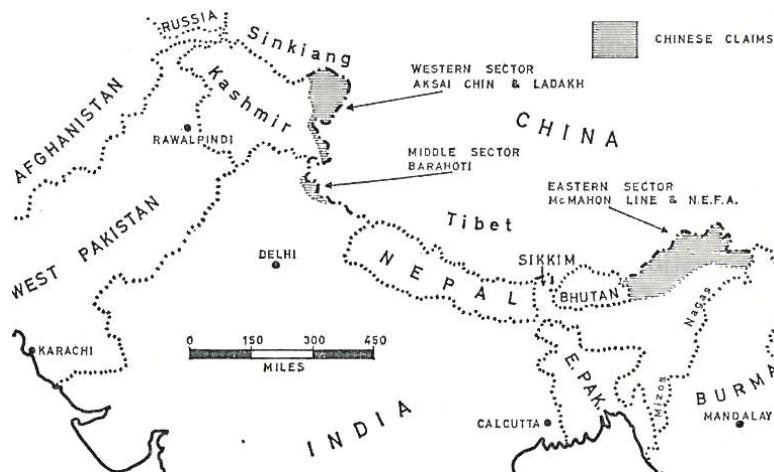
The Indo-Tibetan frontier ran along the world's most massive chain of mountains, the Himalayas. In pre-colonial times these mountains had functioned as a natural barrier between India and Tibet. There was no precise border line as defined in a modern legal sense. Rather, the inhospitable mountain area constituted what can be understood as a natural *frontier* separating India from its northern neighbours by sheer physical force.²¹² It was a more or less overlapping area, a marchland in which the contiguous pre-colonial states had neither strong interest nor technological capacity to dominate efficiently. Tibet, or China via Tibet, rarely posed a security threat to Indian states, nor vice versa. The rock solid stability of the Himalayan frontiers was not seriously challenged until the advent of British colonial rule. The Europeans brought path breaking technology, new geopolitical strategies as well as foreign concepts of space and territoriality to India. They introduced ideas of more precise territorial delimitation than had been common in pre-colonial states.²¹³ Like Tibet, the Himalayan frontiers became part and parcel of the geopolitical strategies of the Raj in Asia. India's colonial frontiers were, in short, shaped by the Great Game.²¹⁴ Securing an "un-Russian" Tibet was not sufficient for forward school strategists; in periods of Russian strength, it was also deemed important to expand the British Indian frontiers in such fashion as to facilitate and enhance the marginal defence of India. In other words, there was a tendency to enlarge the frontiers in periods of strategic uncertainty and reduce them, and the potential cost of maintenance, in periods of stability.

Stretching over 2000 miles, the entire Himalayan frontier was in reality composed of several frontiers; there were necessarily different areas with unique geopolitical characteristics. The entire frontier could roughly be divided in three parts: a western sector covering the frontier of Ladakh towards Xinjiang and western Tibet, a middle sector running largely north of the United Provinces (UP), and an eastern sector covering the area north of Assam and the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA).

²¹² Hoffmann 1990: 26

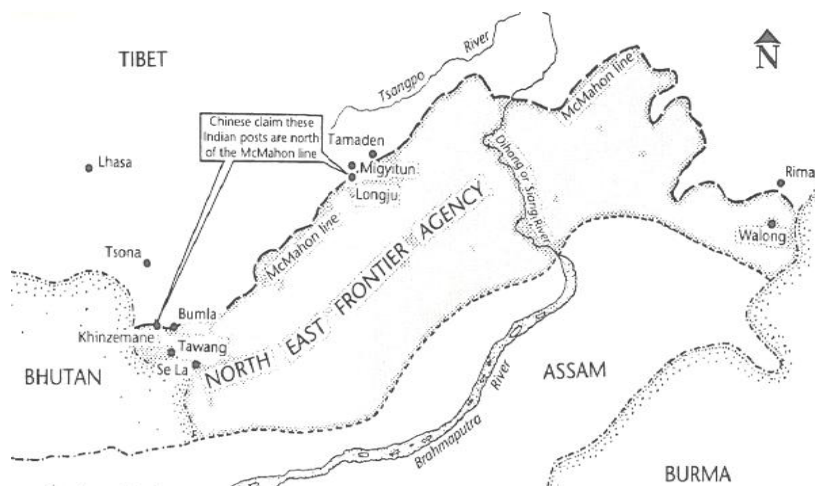
²¹³ See Schlögel, Karl (2003) *Im Raume lesen wir die Zeit. Über Zivilisationsgeschichte und Geopolitik*, Carl Hanser Verlag, München: 198

²¹⁴ Guruswamy & Singh 2009: 8–11



Map 1. The three sectors of the frontier. Source: Lamb 1968: 118

The middle and eastern sectors of the frontier were largely stable. By the Simla accord of 1914 the colonial Government of India had in fact agreed with Tibetan authorities on a common border in the eastern sector, known as the McMahon line. Although the Chinese representative refused to sign the border agreement and only ambiguously initialled it, independent India thus inherited what it considered to be a legal and recognised border in the north-east. In British India, the eastern frontier – or de jure border after 1914 – was largely seen as stable and even “forgotten”.²¹⁵

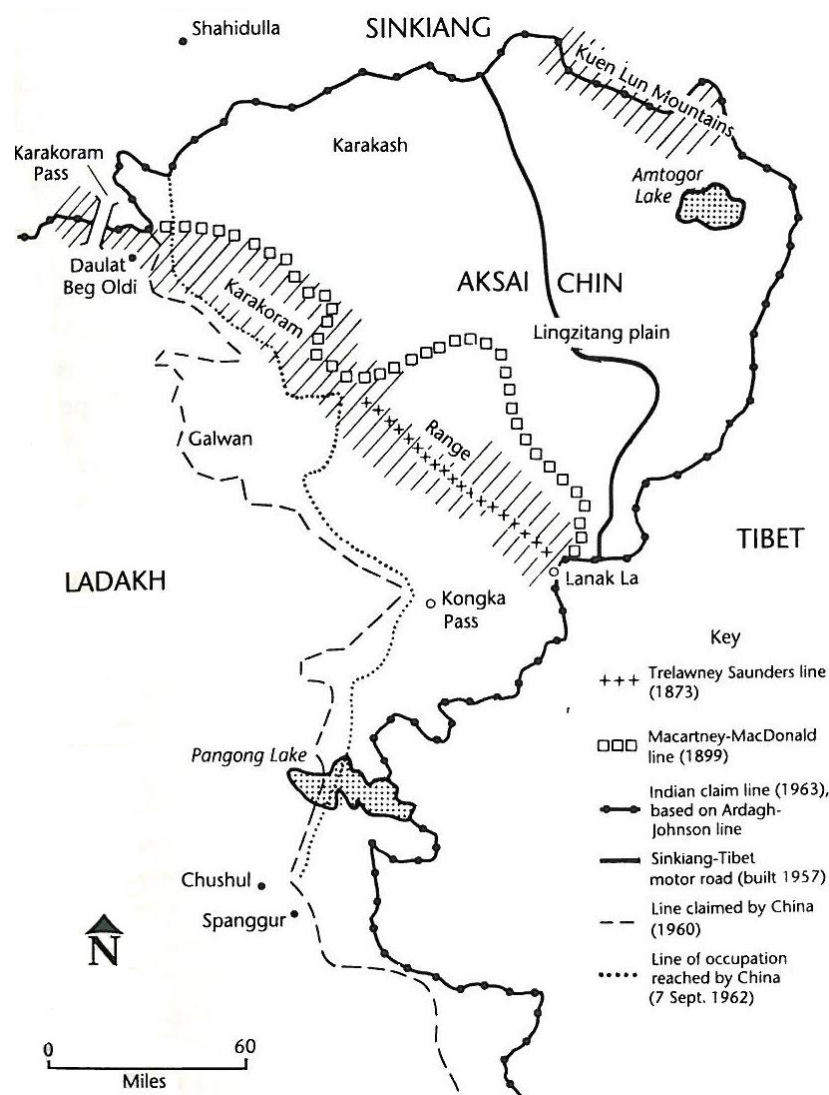


Map 2. The eastern sector and the McMahon line. Source: Hoffmann 1990: 17

The same could not be said of the western end of the Himalayas, at the trijunction of Ladakh, Tibet and East Turkestan (later called *Xinjiang* under Chinese rule). During the heyday of the Raj in the late 19th century, it was the portion of the frontier in Ladakh that attracted most attention. The principal cause for this was the geographical proximity to Russian forward

²¹⁵ Guruswamy & Singh 2009: 21

territories. Great Game strategists left significant imprints in this area of the frontier, but never succeeded in establishing a formal border line similar to the McMahon line in the east. The challenge initially arose after the British gained control of Jammu, Ladakh and Kashmir by the treaty of Lahore in 1846.²¹⁶ The Maharaja of Kashmir who ruled these territories had no defined borders with Tibet or East Turkestan. But the Maharaja did have a history of exerting limited authority as far to the north as Shahidulla, north of Karakoram Pass, where an outpost had been established.²¹⁷



Map 3. Boundaries in the western sector. Source: Hoffmann 1990: 11

The British government on several occasions sought to define a formal border with Chinese central authorities, but for various reasons the efforts ran into the sand – lastly in 1899.²¹⁸ Partly, this may have been because the Qing government was already under hard pressure in

²¹⁶ Guruswamy & Singh 2009: 11

²¹⁷ Guruswamy & Singh 2009: 12; see also Gopal 1984: 303

²¹⁸ Guruswamy & Singh 2009: 12, 16

the Han Chinese core areas and hence could not prioritise border negotiations in the imperial periphery of Xinjiang; partly they did not have much influence in Tibet; and partly the reason could be that London did not want to press the issue too hard with China. Indeed, Calcutta's proactive frontier policies – i.e. the British Indian perspective – were often not in harmony with the political desires of Whitehall, which had to consider British interests in India as one component in a larger global perspective.²¹⁹ For London, Britain's global interests had precedence to the local interests of its colonies; enhancing the Indian frontiers at the cost of Anglo-Chinese relations was therefore not necessarily an attractive policy.

In any case, the imperial authorities in Beijing did not respond actively to the British initiatives. And the lack of a clear boundary constituted no major problem for British India given that neither China nor Tibet posed credible security threats. The lack of a *de jure* border was no obstacle to British rule as long as the Government of India was able to establish a frontier that served its geopolitical expediencies vis-à-vis the perceived Russian menace. This geopolitical logic was expressed by the unilateral adoption of border lines that developed and changed apace with the colonial bureaucracy's threat perceptions. Among the many unilateral attempts to draw a British Indian boundary in the western sector, it is possible to distinguish between two main types: one expansive and one modest version.²²⁰ The expansive variety was typified by the Ardagh-Johnson line (1865) – which defined the territory up to the desolate Kuen Lun Mountains as Indian. The modest version was represented by the Macartney-MacDonald line (1899) and the Trelawney Saunders line (1873) which both roughly defined the Karakoram Mountains as the limits of Indian territory. The main territorial difference between the Kuen Lun and the Karakoram lines was the in-between plateau of Aksai Chin, a high altitude desert of around 14 000 square miles with no habitation or noteworthy natural resources.²²¹

When the ambitious Survey of India explorer W. H. Johnson first drew a line along the Kuen Lun Mountains in 1865, it was in the context of Russian advances, unrest in Turkestan and on the basis of expansive territorial claims made by the Maharaja of Kashmir.²²² The Trelawney Saunders line of 1873 and the Macartney-MacDonald line of 1899, on the other hand, could be seen as expressions of Whitehall's desire for a less expansive – and less expensive – frontier. The more modest proposal of a frontier along the

²¹⁹ Guruswamy & Singh 2009: 20–21

²²⁰ Cf. map 3. See also figure 4.1 in Ganguly, Sumit (2004) *India and China: Border Issues, Domestic Integration and International Security*, in, Frankel, Francine R. & Harding, Harry (ed.) (2004) *The India-China Relationship. What the United States Needs to Know*, Columbia University Press, New York: 107

²²¹ Garver 2001: 79

²²² See Guruswamy & Singh 2009: 14; Lamb 1964: 87

Karakoram mountain range was in fact also suggested as a point of departure for formal border talks with the Chinese authorities in 1899 – but Beijing did not respond to the invitation.²²³ In any case, the “forward” Viceroy Lord Curzon soon also rejected it and – urged on by recommendations from the director of military intelligence, John Ardagh – he returned to the Kuen Lun line proposed by Johnson and reconfirmed by Ardagh himself.²²⁴ Although subsequent Viceroys differed in their perceptions of the frontier, the Ardagh-Johnson line seems to have been revitalised as late as the Second World War when the British Indian government feared Soviet influence in Xinjiang.²²⁵ The available sources do not however positively confirm such speculations.²²⁶

Most importantly, early independent India – lacking a formal border arrangement in the western sector – chose to officially settle for a slightly modified Ardagh-Johnson interpretation.²²⁷ It could be argued that the “forward” Ardagh-Johnson line was preferred as a substitute to the lost buffer of Tibet – much in line with British geopolitical calculation.²²⁸ On the other hand, India's formal cartographical claim to Aksai Chin came as late as 1953, when Sino-Indian relations were cordial; furthermore the claim was not followed up by control on the ground. The perceived pre-colonial activity of Indian states in the area seems to have been a key factor in the equation, although it was in fact controversial whether or not the Indian claim to Aksai Chin actually had sound historical foundations.²²⁹ Perceptions of identity and history seem to have been the underlying factor for adopting the expansive border line, although strategic considerations in the wake of 1950 may have functioned as a contributory cause.²³⁰ Whereas the Raj had principally been guided by geopolitical calculation in its frontier policies, early independent India thus seemed to be primarily driven by historical perceptions and identity. Due to a lack of primary sources from the Government of India on this matter, the discussion must to some extent be characterised as qualified speculation. For all practical purposes, however, both the Raj and the Union of India ended at the Karakoram Mountains.²³¹

²²³ Guruswamy & Singh 2009: 16

²²⁴ Guruswamy & Singh 2009: 18

²²⁵ Guruswamy & Singh 2009: 19. The notion that the British thought of or treated the Ardagh-Johnson line as their boundary after the First World War is controversial; see Hoffmann 1990: 13. The significant point to note here is that the independent Government of India would argue in terms of such an interpretation.

²²⁶ Hoffmann 1990: 13

²²⁷ Ganguly 2004: 106

²²⁸ Hoffmann 1990: 24

²²⁹ See Lamb 1964; Raghavan 2010: 248–249

²³⁰ Hoffmann discusses the strategic considerations, but also explains Nehru's choice of border alignment in terms of nationalism and identity issues (1990: 7, 25–28).

²³¹ Cf. Guruswamy & Singh 2009: 19–20

All in all, the question of the frontiers was a minor issue to the new Indian government. There were far more serious challenges to grapple with in the wake of partition. The question was not revitalised until the Chinese invasion of Tibet – at which point Vallabhbhai Patel expressed profound concern to the Prime Minister:

we have to consider what new situation now faces us as a result of the disappearance of Tibet, as we knew it, and the expansion of China almost up to our gates. (...) The Chinese interpretation of suzerainty seems to be different. We can, therefore, safely assume that very soon they will disown all the stipulations which Tibet has entered into with us in the past. That throws into the melting pot all frontier and commercial settlements with Tibet on which we have been functioning and acting during the last half a century. (...) The undefined state of the frontier and the existence on our side of a population with its affinities to Tibetans or Chinese have all the elements of potential trouble between China and ourselves.²³²

Nehru did recognise the observation that India faced new challenges after Beijing had reasserted its authority north of the Himalayas. But as in the case of Tibet, he argued that India's interests on the frontiers would be better served by ameliorating Sino-Indian relations than by provoking the Chinese. Nehru, in contrast to Patel, was of the opinion that China was not inclined to seriously threaten the Indian frontiers. His reasoning was partly based on a realist argument that China could not afford a "wild adventure" across the towering Himalayas against a friendly nation like India while simultaneously facing grave threats in its eastern heartlands from Formosa and Korea.²³³ But the argument would increasingly also be based on a notion that India's frontiers were stable because they were – from the Indian perspective – based on formal agreement (McMahon line of 1914) or historical precedence (Kuen Lun line in Ladakh) as well as natural geographical features like watershed.²³⁴ Nehru's legal and historical interpretation was further boosted during the course of the 1950s under the influence of the director of the MEA historical division, Sarvepalli Gopal.²³⁵ Partly, Nehru may have assumed that India's case was so clear that the Chinese had no good reason to question it. But mainly, he considered the frontiers to be an utterly marginal issue on the bright new horizon of the Asian family of nations – both for India and for China.

Indian maps reflected both the minor importance accorded to the frontiers as well as the gradually developing legal and historical interpretation of the Nehru government. In the official map of 1950, Aksai Chin had ambiguously been marked as undefined.²³⁶ The Survey of India did not cartographically depict the modified Ardagh-Johnson line as India's border

²³² Deputy PM Vallabhbhai Patel's personal letter to Nehru, 7 November 1950, in: Patel 1974: 337

²³³ Nehru's note on China and Tibet, 18 November 1950 in Patel 1974: 344

²³⁴ Garver 2001: 89

²³⁵ See Gopal 1984: 303

²³⁶ See for example the Indian map of 1950 in Guruswamy & Singh 2009: 18 (Map 2) on which the McMahon line is shown as India's boundary in the east, but where Aksai Chin and the western border are marked with the words "Boundary Undefined".

until revisions of the official maps began in 1953.²³⁷ During the negotiations in 1954 the cartographic claim was at best only implicitly expressed. In hindsight, a principal critique has been that India ought to have demanded Chinese guarantees for the Government of India's interpretation of the entire frontier.²³⁸ This might have been a reasonable *quid pro quo* in return for the Government of India's acknowledgement of the "Tibet region of China". In fact it was also suggested in the MEA that Nehru should raise the topic of frontiers and borders with the Chinese – something which he declined to do, supported by ambassador K. M. Panikkar.²³⁹ The motivation behind this later much lamented decision may not so much have been Nehru's desire for China's friendship as the firm belief that there was really nothing to discuss in terms of India's borders – and that the Chinese would pay heed to this.²⁴⁰ Silence was interpreted as mutual acceptance. Upon reports that certain Chinese maps showed Indian claimed territory as Chinese, he did however – urged on by MEA officials – discuss the topic with Zhou Enlai privately during a visit to Beijing in 1954.²⁴¹ The answers he received were reassuring enough: the PRC had not yet had sufficient time to update old maps and there was no reason to worry.²⁴² In short, the border issue was no cause of major concern for the Government of India either before or after the Chinese invasion of Tibet. The Panchsheel agreement of 1954 and the *Hindi-Chini bhai-bhai* period succeeding it seemed to include an implicit "gentleman's agreement" on the Indian frontiers and claim lines.²⁴³ India's frontiers appeared to remain unchallenged under the new buffer of friendship. In other words India claimed a "forward" frontier with Curzonian connotations, but simultaneously appeared to reject the power politics of the Great Game.

²³⁷ Garver 2001: 89

²³⁸ Ganguly 2004: 109; Guruswamy & Singh 2009: 56–57

²³⁹ Hoffmann 1990: 32–33

²⁴⁰ At least this was the interpretation of Nehru; Letter from the Prime Minister of India to the Prime Minister of China, 14 December 1958, in: India. MEA 1959 (White Paper I); see Ganguly 2004: 111

²⁴¹ Ganguly 2004: 111–112

²⁴² Letter from the Prime Minister of India to the Prime Minister of China, 14 December 1958, in: India. MEA 1959 (White Paper I); Letter from the Prime Minister of China to the Prime Minister of India, 23 January 1959, in: India. MEA 1959 (White Paper I)

²⁴³ See Ganguly 2004: 109. Professor Srikanth Kondapalli at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi argues that there was more than an implicit "gentleman's agreement" in 1954. He claims to have information from high sources in the US government that the 1954 agreement between the PRC and the Government of India was followed by secret clauses in which both parties agreed to abstain from aggressive "forward" behaviour in the Himalayan frontier region for a period of eight years. China seems to have broken this promise by the end of the 1950s with the Tibetan revolt; India's Forward Policy can hence be interpreted more as a counter to Chinese forward moves than as a proactive or aggressive initiative. This interpretation must, however, remain highly speculative as it is not yet possible to verify the empirical information upon which it builds. It is furthermore questionable whether India would have kept such secret clauses confidential after the war in 1962 given that they would actually have demonstrated Chinese *mala fides*. Personal communication, 29 July 2010, New Delhi

India, in short, claimed territory it was not in physical possession of. The Chinese PLA on the other hand did actually rely on the Aksai Chin plateau for a transit route to Tibet already during the invasion of 1950–1. The Intelligence Bureau allegedly notified Indian authorities of the Chinese activity in the area during the early 1950s, but no further action was taken.²⁴⁴ Judging by the lack of exercise of sovereignty in the area, it would seem that Aksai Chin and the Kuen Lun line had no practical importance to Nehru's government. In contrast, the McMahon line was perceived as definite and legal in New Delhi right from independence. It has been suggested that in the early 1950s Nehru was in fact open to negotiate on Aksai Chin on the basis of pragmatic considerations and that it was not seen as non-negotiable Indian territory like areas south of the McMahon line.²⁴⁵ On the other hand, Nehru's emphasis on history and identity could imply that he may not have been willing to negotiate on Aksai Chin, despite the fact that India did not – or could not – prioritise effective domination of the desolate mountain region. Early Indian perceptions of the Kuen Lun alignment nevertheless seem to have been more nuanced than what became politically correct to argue after the public outbreak of the dispute.

Tibet and the frontiers – a tournament of past shadows

The fairly relaxed atmosphere in Sino-Indian relations would begin to change from early 1958 onwards. Partly, the Khampa rebellion and the dismantling of traditional Tibetan autonomy were becoming known in India. Tibet was swarming with rebel and Chinese military activity. Closer to home the Government of India's territorial claims were simultaneously becoming openly challenged by Beijing. Since 1954 there had been minor territorial discrepancies at Bara Hoti in the otherwise little contested middle sector. Indian patrols repeatedly met Chinese troops on what was considered to be Indian territory by New Delhi, but nevertheless tried to avoid confrontations. In line with Zhou Enlai's reassurances that PRC maps had not yet been brought up to date, Nehru kept the issue of Bara Hoti discreetly away from parliament and the public eye.²⁴⁶ The Bara Hoti affair could thus be held at a low key bureaucratic level and was seen more in terms of a "petty issue" than of a serious territorial dispute.²⁴⁷

It was in the western sector that a potential territorial conflict between India and China first became evident to New Delhi. In September 1957 an official Chinese publication

²⁴⁴ Garver 2001: 89; Hoffmann: 1990: 35

²⁴⁵ Cf. Raghavan 2010: 246

²⁴⁶ Ganguly 2004: 112

²⁴⁷ See letter from the Prime Minister of India to the Prime Minister of China, 14 December 1958, in: India. MEA 1959 (White Paper I)

announced that a motor road running from Xinjiang straight through Aksai Chin to Tibet was nearly completed.²⁴⁸ The Indian government was informed about the road by its embassy in Beijing.²⁴⁹ When Indian military patrols were sent out to Aksai Chin on a reconnaissance mission in the following summer of 1958, they not only confirmed the information but one patrol was actually taken captive by Chinese troops.²⁵⁰ In parallel, bureaucratic level negotiations with Beijing on Bara Hoti in March and April 1958 turned out to be considerably tougher than the Indian side had expected.²⁵¹ Combined with unsettling military activity in Tibet, the year 1958 and the developing events on the ground thus seemed to point in a different direction than the laudatory political rhetoric of the two governments. There was no doubt any more that the question of borders had to be explicitly discussed at the highest level so that the whole issue could be sorted out.

When Nehru finally sat down in December 1958 and wrote a frank letter to Zhou on the subject of borders, the vision of an Asian renaissance built upon Sino-Indian friendship remained India's leading star.²⁵² But at the same time, the geopolitical developments in Tibet and on the frontiers meant that India-China relations more and more constituted an uneasy marriage. It consisted of two separate and increasingly incompatible tendencies that seemed to pull in opposite directions, yet still without breaking Nehru's much celebrated diplomatic edifice. On the one hand, there was *Hindi-Chini bhai-bhai*, on the other there was a Chinese motor road in the middle of Aksai Chin and a brewing revolt in Tibet; Curzon's geopolitical buffer was gone by 1951, and Nehru's alternative psychological buffer now seemed to be under pressure. But there was still room for an uneasy marriage within the broad church of Indian China policy in 1958. The cracks were barely visible to Nehru himself. Officially, Indians and Chinese were still brothers. China continued to be a pivotal long-term priority for Nehruvian India.

Did Nehru pursue a policy of appeasement vis-à-vis China? In hindsight, the Government of India has been accused of sacrificing not only Tibet, but also the integrity of India's frontiers on the altar of friendship with China. John W. Garver considers early Nehruvian China policy in the unflattering light of appeasement.²⁵³ The contrast between the time when Tibet was invited as an independent nation to the Asian Relations conference in

²⁴⁸ Cf. map 3; Hoffmann 1990: 35

²⁴⁹ Guruswamy & Singh 2009: 68

²⁵⁰ Hoffmann 1990: 36

²⁵¹ Hoffmann 1990: 35

²⁵² Letter from the Prime Minister of India to the Prime Minister of China, 14 December 1958, in: India. MEA 1959 (White Paper I)

²⁵³ Garver 2001: 50. The expression is also found in Dalrymple, William (2009) *Nine Lives*, Bloomsbury, London: 169

March 1947 to the point where India in 1954 formally acknowledged Tibet as a part of China could seem to point in that direction. So does the fact that Nehru refused to sponsor Tibet's appeal to the UN in order to avoid "bitter speaking and accusation".²⁵⁴ In contrast to Vallabhbhai Patel, the Prime Minister considered Sino-Indian friendship even more important after the invasion of Tibet and argued against antagonising China: "the real protection we should seek is some kind of understanding with China."²⁵⁵ On the other hand, however, it is important to consider what credible options Nehru had at that time. Militarily or multilaterally there was not much India or any other country could have done to help Lhasa in 1950; the 1954 agreement can thus merely be seen to have acknowledged a Chinese *fait accompli*.²⁵⁶ The fact that Sino-Indian relations were accorded a higher priority than supporting the virtually lost cause of Tibetan independence does not necessarily justify the term appeasement. "Appeasement" in the sense of Chamberlain's policy in Munich 1938 cannot reasonably be applied as a term to Nehruvian Tibet policy.²⁵⁷ Nehru did not tactically buy time or barter in front of an expansionist power, but rather sought to lay the foundations for a grand strategic partnership he honestly believed in.²⁵⁸ When push came to shove, Nehru thought the best help India could realistically offer Tibet was to avoid antagonising Beijing.²⁵⁹ A peaceful and de facto autonomous "Tibet region of China" would also favour Indian security apprehensions on the frontiers. As Sumit Ganguly has hinted at, early Nehruvian China policy could thus be understood as pragmatic rather than as appeasing.²⁶⁰ There may not be any clear distinction given that appeasement policies can also have clearly pragmatic aspects and vice versa. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that interpretations of the period are inevitably coloured by the present knowledge of subsequent historical development. Seen through the martial prism of 1962, it is facile to criticise the Government of India's early policies on China, Tibet and the borders. It must be a central historiographical ambition to employ this posterior insight with care and humbleness.²⁶¹ Nehru deemed war between India and China to be "inconceivable".²⁶² The development from 1947 to 1958 must to the extent possible be understood on its own premises and in terms of its own context.

²⁵⁴ Nehru's note on China and Tibet, 18 November 1950 in Patel 1974: 346

²⁵⁵ Nehru's note on China and Tibet, 18 November 1950 in Patel 1974: 343, 346

²⁵⁶ See Guruswamy & Singh 2009: 56; Nehru's note on China and Tibet, 18 November 1950 in Patel 1974: 343

²⁵⁷ Cf. Ganguly 2004: 128, note 23

²⁵⁸ See Frankel, Francine R. (2004) *Introduction*, in: Frankel & Harding (ed.) 2004: 29

²⁵⁹ Nehru's note on China and Tibet, 18 November 1950 in Patel 1974: 346

²⁶⁰ See Ganguly 2004: 128, note 23

²⁶¹ Raghavan 2010: 4

²⁶² Nehru's note on China and Tibet, 18 November 1950 in Patel 1974: 344

(iii) Asian light, Himalayan shadows

In sum, Indian China policy in the period 1947–1958 reflected both the challenges facing an underdeveloped post-colonial state, as well as the ambitions and dreams its leaders harboured for the long run. The architect of India's foreign policy, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, considered Sino-Indian friendship as crucial not only for the future of India as a developing country, but also strategically for peace and stability in Asia: "I think the future of Asia and to some extent the world depends upon this."²⁶³ Indian China policy was an expression of diplomatic grand strategy and came to embody a vision and a time aspect that was not only meant to cater to India's immediate day to day interests. It was designed to provide a fertile foundation for a comprehensive bilateral relationship of potential world importance.²⁶⁴ Indian China policy encapsulated Nehru's visions of an Asian renaissance with India and China as the central actors in a prosperous, peaceful and non-aligned Asia. In short, it was a cornerstone of his foreign policy. In parallel, India-China relations were nevertheless increasingly challenged by momentous geopolitical developments in the wake of the Chinese revolution of 1949. Indian China policy soon had to confront factors like the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950 as well as the nebulous state of India's long frontiers with what had by 1954 become the "Tibet region of China".²⁶⁵ The relationship that seemed to be a perfect match in 1947 had by 1958 developed into an uneasy marriage – still dominated by Nehru's proactive policy of friendship, but simultaneously challenged by geopolitical developments on the ground.

While there were obvious breaks with the past at the diplomatic and rhetorical level, the geopolitical dimension of early India-China relations revealed significant continuity with the colonial past. There was no *tabula rasa*, despite the euphoria of independence. The territorial parameters within which the new relationship was shaped were inherited from the Raj. In practical terms India came to defend 19th century colonial frontiers in the Himalayas, while China re-conquered its erstwhile imperial possession after a century of humiliation. Independent India inherited the fruits of the Great Game, but refused to continue playing it by the rules of Curzonian realpolitik. The political light of independence met the long geopolitical shadows of the past. In this twilight, the Prime Minister consistently downplayed individual negative developments in favour of long-term prospects and dismissed Patel's

²⁶³ Nehru to Thakin Nu, Prime Minister of Burma, 7 January 1950. Nehru to K. M. Panikkar, Indian ambassador to China, 2 September 1950; quoted in Brown 2004: 268

²⁶⁴ Nayar & Paul 2004: 116–117; Gopal, Sarvepalli (1979) *Jawaharlal Nehru: A Biography*, Vol. II: 1947–1956, Jonathan Cape, London: 138–139

²⁶⁵ See deputy PM Vallabhbhai Patel's personal letter to Nehru, 7 November 1950, in: Patel 1974: 335–341

clarion call. Sino-Indian friendship was too important to be derailed by “petty issues”. It is within this inherently unstable combination of pan-Asian optimism and post-Great Game geopolitics that the contextual origins and the root causes of the 1961 Forward Policy decision can be found.

Despite new and disconcerting questions, Tibet and the frontiers still appeared to be separate details on the horizon of India-China relations. The psychological buffer was stronger than the impact of these individual geopolitical challenges. Within one year, however, the two factors would intertwine and forcefully break the superficial harmony of the Sino-Indian relationship. The first blow came with Zhou Enlai's reply letter of 23 January 1959. It made clear to Nehru that Beijing did not recognise any "gentleman's agreement" in 1954 and that the PRC and India in effect had a disagreement on the borders.²⁶⁶

²⁶⁶ Letter from the Prime Minister of China to the Prime Minister of India, 23 January 1959, in: India. MEA 1959 (White Paper I)

II

The Rise of the Border Dispute

In late January 1959 the contours of a border dispute in Aksai Chin were casting shadows over Nehru's grand strategic vision of Sino-Indian partnership. But the emerging dispute was still subject to confidential analysis in New Delhi's corridors of power. During the course of the following two years, what had originally been portrayed in terms of "petty issues" metamorphosed into a painfully public territorial dispute between the two nations. The proximate causes of the Forward Policy decision can be identified within this time span. By late 1961 the Government of India had reached an impasse in which a new approach towards China seemed to be required.

In order to clarify the proximate causes of the Forward Policy decision, the Tibetan rebellion of 1959 and the subsequent external pressure that affected the Government of India will be discussed first. Secondly, the internal pressure on the government and the domestic dynamics of the conflict from the Tibetan rebellion and onwards will be examined. The initial response to this internal and external pressure in the form of diplomacy in 1960 will be discussed in a third section. Finally, the gradual hardening of Indian perceptions and the outcome of the diplomatic process will be analysed, followed by a concluding summary of the chapter.

(i) External pressure

The most cordial period of Sino-Indian friendship, from Panchsheel in 1954 to the discovery of the road in 1958, coincided with a relatively stable situation on the Tibetan side of the frontier. The Khampa rebellion had been simmering since the mid-1950s and escalated in 1958, but largely took place in eastern Tibet far from the Indian frontiers. By spring 1959, however, a general rebellion was spreading throughout Tibet.²⁶⁷ Autonomy dwindled as the People's Liberation Army (PLA) launched comprehensive counter-insurgency operations. A climax was reached in March 1959 when Lhasa came out in open revolt against Chinese rule. The PLA reacted severely to what was officially considered as a rebellion of "big serf-owners".²⁶⁸ In these circumstances the Dalai Lama decided to escape from anticipated

²⁶⁷ Garver 2001: 56

²⁶⁸ Garver 2001: 56; Garver 2006: 94

captivity and on 31 March 1959 crossed the McMahon line over to Tawang to seek refuge in India, followed by thousands of his countrymen.²⁶⁹

To the great displeasure of the PRC his request was granted by the Government of India – on humanitarian grounds. Worse still, the Dalai Lama received an enthusiastic reception in Indian media and also had meetings with Nehru and Indian officials.²⁷⁰ From a Chinese perspective, this was a major set-back in the bilateral relationship and may have been one of the vital turning points in the already growing distance between New Delhi and Beijing.²⁷¹ From Beijing's point of view, Indian policy seemed duplicitous; on the one hand publicly professing friendship with new China, on the other hand discreetly supporting its enemies in Tibet.²⁷² Available Chinese sources seem to point in the direction that from 1959 onwards, Chairman Mao and other central Chinese decision makers interpreted Indian policy moves in the light of an increasingly sensitive Tibet prism.²⁷³ The border conflict, and especially India's claim on Aksai Chin – with the strategically important road linking Xinjiang to isolated parts of Tibet – seems to have fitted well into a narrative of Indian designs on Tibet. Why else would India claim an area which even Prime Minister Nehru had admitted was of little practical use for India and where they had not even been in a position of actual occupation? Beijing suspected India of collaborating with the CIA and the western world in undermining Tibet's integration into the PRC.²⁷⁴ More to the point, Chairman Mao feared that the "Indian expansionists" wanted to "seize Tibet" from China and, in line with pre-1947 imperial strategies, turn it into a buffer state or a colony.²⁷⁵

The new threat perceptions were first given mild expression in China's government controlled press from April 1959 through a series of critical articles on Indian policy and, by May, through elaborate personal attacks on "Nehru's philosophy".²⁷⁶ All public utterances or activities in India that were critical of Chinese Tibet policy came to be understood as interferences in China's internal affairs and hence as an assault on the Panchsheel agreement

²⁶⁹ Prasad 1992: 31; United States. CIA March 1963: 13

²⁷⁰ Garver 2001: 57

²⁷¹ Bhutani 2004: 53–59

²⁷² See Garver 2001: 54, 57

²⁷³ Garver 2006: 102

²⁷⁴ Garver 2001: 57. Whether or not Chinese suspicions of some kind of Indian co-operation with CIA operations in Tibet were legitimate is a matter of discussion. Available Indian sources have not verified such allegations. A series of analyses nevertheless point in the direction that Nehru, or at least the IB, may passively have known about American activities into Tibet – but there is no evidence that the Indians were active participants; see Garver 2006: 101; Hoffmann 1990: 38; Raghavan 2010: 250. The primary sources are still too insufficient to definitely confirm or reject these speculations. The main point to note in this context is that Chinese leaders *believed* the Indians co-operated with the CIA.

²⁷⁵ Cited in Garver 2006: 102

²⁷⁶ United States. CIA March 1963: 16–21

of 1954. The Chinese ambassador on 16 May regretted the "large quantities of words and deeds slandering China and interfering in China's internal affairs" and in a slightly nebulous, but surprisingly candid tone warned that India could not afford to have "two fronts".²⁷⁷

From the perspective of the Government of India, the overall picture looked very different indeed. To Nehru, there were no other principled options available than granting the Tibetan leader humanitarian asylum – despite conscious awareness of the detrimental impact this could have on India-China relations.²⁷⁸ Neither was there much a democratic government could do to hinder expressions of pro-Tibetan sympathies by the Indian public – sympathies that were in turn vigorously reflected by the opposition in parliament. The nuances in Nehru's handling of the Dalai Lama and the Tibet question were rooted in India's liberal democratic system of government and may have been difficult to grasp for the revolutionary Chinese government.²⁷⁹ In his meeting with the Dalai Lama on 24 April, Nehru recognised that the Chinese "suspect everything we say" and explained that "at the moment, our relations with China are bad". He stressed the need to "recover the lost ground" and "retain good relations with China". War was no option, and "cursing the Chinese was no alternative." The Dalai Lama in turn acknowledged the Indian government's concerns and "agreed that India should be in the middle and try to help Tibet through China [and that] the attempt should be to develop good relations between India and China so as to find a solution to Tibet".²⁸⁰ In the midst of increasingly severe public reactions to China, Nehru was thus focussed on mending Sino-Indian relations. A return to constructive dialogue would be the key to influence Beijing in a more advantageous direction for India and Tibet alike.

There may all in all have been a lack of understanding in India for the delicate Chinese sensitivities over Tibet – especially so in parliament, press and public opinion. But on the other hand, there was equally a lack of Chinese understanding for the vocal nature of India's heterogeneous democratic society. Foreign Secretary Dutt, under Nehru's instructions, responded to the Chinese ambassador's complaints of 16 May by explicitly pointing out that "it is evident that this freedom of expression, free press and civil liberties in India are not fully

²⁷⁷ Statement made by the Chinese Ambassador to the Foreign Secretary, 16 May 1959, in: White Paper (I)

²⁷⁸ United States. CIA March 1963: 16; see also: Record of PM's talk with Dalai Lama on 24th April, 1959, in: Subimal Dutt Papers, subject file 9, NMML. The Dalai Lama was not allowed to carry on political work in India. Beijing nevertheless held little trust in this caveat.

²⁷⁹ See Guha 2008: 305; see also the statement made by the Chinese Ambassador to the Foreign Secretary, 16 May 1959, in: White Paper (I); and the firm answer-cum-lecture given by the Foreign Secretary in his statement to the Chinese Ambassador, 23 May 1959, in: White Paper (I)

²⁸⁰ Record of PM's talk with Dalai Lama on 24th April, 1959, in: Subimal Dutt Papers, subject file 9, NMML

appreciated by the Government of China, and that hence misunderstandings arise."²⁸¹ It was in many ways a conflict of two fundamentally different political cultures that was brought afore by the Tibetan revolt and the entry of the Dalai Lama to India in March 1959.²⁸²

Militarisation of the Tibetan frontier

If India's sympathetic public reception of the Dalai Lama and thousands of Tibetan refugees was a major source of irritation and concern for Beijing, the increased Chinese military activity in the frontier areas would in turn become the principal challenge for India. Nehru held his knowledge of the increasingly strained situation discreetly away from a by then inquisitive parliament, and publicly stressed the need for a balanced and calm approach to China.²⁸³ Simultaneously, Indian patrolling along the eastern frontier was increased.²⁸⁴ Intelligence reports noted the large presence of Chinese troops on India's northern frontiers and underlined the fact that their strength by far outweighed India's own capabilities there.²⁸⁵ Now that Sino-Indian relations were straining and Tibetan autonomy was waning, Tibet was no more a buffer to speak of either in geopolitical or in psychological terms. By summer 1959 the Sino-Indian friendship had cooled down considerably. Nevertheless, armed conflict between the two Asian powers seemed both improbable and highly undesirable in New Delhi. In a letter to his sister, at that time High Commissioner to London, Nehru wrote of how "the Chinese are always and, more especially now, given to arrogance and throwing their weight around", but also stressed that "our approach is different [from people used to the cold war]" and that "it does little good to shout loudly and denounce and condemn."²⁸⁶ The Chinese military activities were interpreted in the context of the Tibetan revolt, not from the perspective of a potentially violent border dispute. The cause of the current turbulence seemed above all to stem from Tibet and the Dalai Lama rather than from the new uncertainties on the frontier in Aksai Chin. From an Indian perspective, Tibet and Aksai Chin still seem to have

²⁸¹ Statement of the Foreign Secretary to the Chinese Ambassador, 23 May, 1959, in: White Paper (I); Hoffmann 1990: 65

²⁸² Bhutani, Sudarshan (2004) *A Clash of Political Cultures: Sino-Indian Relations 1957–1962*, Roli Books, New Delhi

²⁸³ United States. CIA March 1963: 25–26

²⁸⁴ India had, according to American estimates, 8 checkpoints along the McMahon line in the summer of 1959. United States. CIA March 1963: 31

²⁸⁵ IB reports from the years before the Tibetan revolt of March 1959 also testified to the fact that there was a significant military build-up in Tibet to face the Khampa rebels. By one estimate there was assumed to be around 100,000 PLA troops in Tibet by December 1958. See: Reports on the Military Situation in Tibet, in: MEA / East Asia Division / 1960: 5(5)-EAD/60, NAI; see also United States. CIA March 1963: 29

²⁸⁶ Letter from Nehru to V. L. Pandit, High Commissioner to London, 15 April 1959, in: subject file 61, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit Papers, NMML

been treated as two technically separate issues, in contrast to the evolving Chinese interpretation of seeing them as two aspects of one and the same problem.

The Chinese militarisation of the Tibetan frontier in the wake of the rebellion and the increased level of patrolling on both sides logically resulted in more frequent and direct contact than previously. As there was no demarcated border, this contact resulted in a number of local tensions and allegations of border incursions. Clashes became "almost inevitable".²⁸⁷ Two particular occasions stick out because of their relative severity and because of their political ramifications in India; firstly the skirmish at Longju in late August, but especially the clash at Kongka Pass on 21 October 1959. At Longju, which was situated in the eastern sector, Indian and Chinese border patrols clashed for the first time on 25 August 1959 leaving one Assam Rifles man dead and one seriously wounded.²⁸⁸ The following day, India was militarily forced to pull out of Longju. According to Beijing, India was to blame for the episode – not least because the Indian picket at Longju was itself north of the "so-called McMahon line" and that Indian presence was thus unwarranted even by the in Chinese eyes unequal 1914 Simla accord.²⁸⁹ India, on the other hand, rejected the Chinese allegations with the argument that Longju was south of the watershed and thus, by interpretation, part and parcel of the 1914 border. Furthermore, according to the Government of India, the twelve man picket of the paramilitary Assam Rifles had been assaulted by a Chinese force of 200 to 300 troops, and could thus be characterised as "deliberate aggression".²⁹⁰ The tension between the two countries was more visibly manifest than ever before.

In tactical terms Longju had merely been a skirmish, but it nevertheless made Indian government officials painfully aware of the unequal levels of military clout on the frontier. The formal responsibility for securing the border was therefore delegated from the paramilitary unit of the Assam Rifles to the Indian Army.²⁹¹ But in reality, little practical change ensued.²⁹² Nehru's established tenet of seeking long-term security through cordial relations to China was only reconfirmed. In his own words, to the Dalai Lama, the challenge was to follow "a middle but difficult course" retaining good relations without "surrender to

²⁸⁷ United States. CIA March 1963: 29

²⁸⁸ Prasad 1992: 33

²⁸⁹ Note given to the Ambassador of India by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, 1 September 1959, in: White Paper II. China's alleged act of aggression against India at Longju and the legal validity of the McMahon line were also repudiated by Zhou's 8 September letter to Nehru; Letter from the Prime Minister of China to the Prime Minister of India, 8 September 1959, in: White Paper II

²⁹⁰ Prasad 1992: 33; United States. CIA March 1963: 30–31. The CIA also assumed that the clash at Longju was initiated by the Chinese, but scaled down the numbers of the Chinese force to 200 men.

²⁹¹ Prasad 1992: 36

²⁹² See United States. CIA March 1963: 32; Prasad 1992: 39

China's strength".²⁹³ From a point of view of realpolitik, Foreign Secretary Dutt told the American deputy chief of mission on 5 September that "we have to be friends with the powerful country with whom we have a border of 2680 miles."²⁹⁴ As one single instance of external pressure on India, Longju therefore did not fundamentally shake the Indian grand strategic approach to China. No major initiatives were taken apart from an intensified exchange of notes and Indian diplomatic efforts to engage the Soviet Union in restraining Chinese aggressiveness.²⁹⁵

Among the external factors that did seem to open a veritable Pandora's box in terms of Indian China policy were (a) the letter Nehru received from Zhou on 8 September and (b) a new and far more serious clash at Kongka Pass in Ladakh on 21 October 1959. Zhou's September letter clearly and explicitly stated that China considered the *entire* Sino-Indian frontier as both undelimited and undemarcated.²⁹⁶ It thus seemed to throw the whole 2600 mile frontier into the melting pot of negotiation, including the McMahon line which Nehru had vigorously defended since 1950 and which he had considered recognised and approved by Zhou Enlai on several occasions in the period 1954–1957.²⁹⁷ Nehru described the tone and contents of the letter as a "great shock" and answered it on 26 September by defending India's interpretation of the frontier in unprecedented detail.²⁹⁸ To the Indians, the entire border was not under any circumstance open to negotiation. Nevertheless, there were implicit nuances: the McMahon line seemed to be given far greater importance than the apparently still rather vague Indian claim on Aksai Chin, which Nehru, barely a week after Longju, described in parliament as "a barren uninhabited region without a vestige of grass".²⁹⁹ It is not inconceivable that Nehru could have been inclined to discuss the status of Aksai Chin at this early point of the dispute. The Chinese disavowal of the entire frontier however offered no acceptable basis for negotiations.

The Chinese letter of 8 September 1959 made an impact of surprise on Nehru personally and seemed to mark the end of his and Zhou's personal bonhomie.³⁰⁰ The lingering notion of a serious disagreement brewing between India and China was further compounded

²⁹³ Record of PM's talk with Dalai Lama on 24th April, 1959, in: Subimal Dutt Papers, subject file 9, NMML

²⁹⁴ United States. CIA March 1963: 33

²⁹⁵ United States. CIA March 1963: 33–34

²⁹⁶ Letter from the Prime Minister of China to the Prime Minister of India, 8 September 1959, in: White Paper II

²⁹⁷ Letter from the Prime Minister of India to the Prime Minister of China, 14 December 1958, in: White Paper (I)

²⁹⁸ Letter from the Prime Minister of India to the Prime Minister of China, 26 September 1959, in: White Paper II

²⁹⁹ Quoted in Raghavan 2010: 253; see United States. CIA March 1963: 34

³⁰⁰ United States. CIA March 1963: 39

in October. On the 21, a second major clash took place between Indian and Chinese personnel at Kongka Pass, south of Aksai Chin in Ladakh. Again the parties accused one another of aggression. But there was no denying that only one Chinese had been killed whereas ten Indian police officers patrolling near the pass were left dead, apparently under heavy fire – the remaining ten being captured and "treated badly while in custody".³⁰¹ These facts could point in the direction of a Chinese attack.³⁰² On the other hand it also revealed the fact that the Indian border police, under the direction of the Intelligence Bureau (IB), patrolled more actively forward in Ladakh than previously.³⁰³ In any circumstance, according to India's official history of the war, "the mask from the Chinese face was now off".³⁰⁴ IB director Mullik, in hindsight described Kongka Pass as the first major precursor to what he terms the Chinese "betrayal" in 1962.³⁰⁵ From Nehru's point of view too it seemed to be the final straw that broke the camel's back – at least in terms of genuine Sino-Indian friendship.³⁰⁶ Chinese policies towards India appeared increasingly capricious and aggressive, quite different from what he would have expected only a few months earlier.³⁰⁷

Nevertheless, escalation to armed conflict was still by no means a likely scenario in the eyes of the Prime Minister. Kongka Pass, in combination with Longju and the 8 September letter, did provoke changes in Nehru's view of China, but his China policy was not fundamentally altered. As in NEFA after Longju, the army was promptly charged with the main responsibility in Ladakh, marking a superficial shift of power from the local border police and the IB towards the professional army. The unprepared 4th Division was eventually dispatched from the scorching plains of Punjab to the towering heights of the Himalayas in NEFA.³⁰⁸ Nevertheless, these were superficial measures. At an emergency cabinet meeting in late October 1959, Nehru, according to American intelligence,

indicated that border fighting did not constitute a threat to India. The strategic Chinese threat, he maintained, lies in the rapidly increasing industrial power base of China as well as the building of military bases in Tibet. The only Indian answer, he continued, is the most rapid possible development of the Indian economy to provide a national power base capable of resisting a possible *eventual* Chinese Communist military move. Nehru seemed to believe that the Chinese

³⁰¹ Prasad 1992: 35. Estimates of casualties vary. There were nine Indian dead according to United States. CIA March 1963: 41; Raghavan (2010: 257) refers to five dead, four injured and ten captured on the Indian side. The main point is nevertheless that Indian casualties were disproportionately large as compared to Chinese casualties.

³⁰² Hoffmann 1990: 78; United States. CIA March 1963: 41

³⁰³ Hoffmann 1990: 75

³⁰⁴ Prasad 1992: 36

³⁰⁵ Mullik 1971: 243

³⁰⁶ See Hoffmann 1990: 62

³⁰⁷ In an interview with Michael Brecher, Krishna Menon also described Kongka Pass as the turning point in the government's perceptions of China; Brecher, Michael (1968) *India and World Politics: Krishna Menon's View of the World*, Oxford University Press, London: 148

³⁰⁸ Guha 2008: 312

could not sustain any major drive across the "great land barrier" and that the Chinese threat was only a long term one.³⁰⁹

The main points of this recently declassified rendition seem credible. The autumn of 1959 may have put an end to Nehru's fervent desire for Sino-Indian friendship, but it did not alter the grand strategic outlook of cultivating an international framework conducive to domestic development. Defence was still seen in a holistic, long term perspective – despite clashes with China in Ladakh and NEFA. While recognising a potential Chinese military threat to India in the long term, it was still considered improbable by the Prime Minister in the short term. If the potential Chinese threat had not been seen in such long term perspective, far stronger preparatory measures could reasonably have been expected to be taken within a relatively short time.³¹⁰ Only minor adjustments were in fact made, something which was partly also reflected in the roughly unaltered defence budgets of the country in the period 1959–1961.³¹¹ The mighty Himalayas were still perceived as a natural barrier against potential Chinese adventurism, just like Nehru had outlined to Patel back in 1950.³¹²

Nonetheless: by autumn 1959 the awareness of a potentially threatening China was undoubtedly stronger than before, also in Nehru's mind. There was a strong feeling of having been let down by the Chinese, and in parts of the government there was outright hostility towards China after August-October.³¹³ In the opinion of the IB director, the Chinese were in effect pursuing a "forward policy" by steadily expanding their occupation of Indian claimed territory, especially in Ladakh.³¹⁴ Seen together the external Chinese pressure on the Government of India, as epitomised not only at Longju and Kongka Pass, but also verbally in Zhou's 8 September letter, thus provoked a negative reaction within important parts of the Indian government. Perhaps most importantly, it would also ignite the anger of an increasingly agitated public opinion.

(ii) Internal pressure

Since the outbreak of the Tibetan rebellion – and more particularly since the entry of the Dalai Lama in India in March 1959 – the outwardly much celebrated *Hindi-Chini bhai-bhai* was increasingly questioned by public opinion. Indian China policy was gradually moving out from the excluding conference rooms of South Block and Teen Murthi Bhavan to the raucous

³⁰⁹ Original emphasis. United States. CIA March 1963: 46

³¹⁰ United States. CIA March 1963: 46

³¹¹ Cf. Kavic 1967: 221

³¹² Nehru's note on China and Tibet, 18 November 1950 in Patel 1974: 344

³¹³ United States. CIA March 1963: 45–46

³¹⁴ Mullik 1971: 246

sphere of the general public. Indian media coverage on Tibet was strongly biased with sympathy to the Tibetans, not least as the defenders of a unique Buddhist culture with roots in India. The national newspapers poured out articles demanding stronger Indian pressure on Beijing to respect Tibetan autonomy. The pro-Tibetan feelings were soon reflected in a parliament that not only genuinely shared the concerns expressed in the press, but whose opposition members were equally quick to grasp an opportunity to criticise the massively dominant Nehru government.³¹⁵ Jayaprakash Narayan, a fêted politician and independence activist, advocated the cause of Tibetan independence; the right-wing Jana Sangh party went further and loudly argued that India should abandon non-alignment and ally with the United States in order to "liberate" Tibet.³¹⁶ Nehru plainly rejected such demands and emphasised that India had recognised Tibet as part of the People's Republic in 1954 and that this was still to be India's policy. But as a concession to public feelings he also – adding to Beijing's increasing suspicion – underlined India's intimate feelings of "deep sympathy" towards Tibet as the cultural "offshoot" of India; Nehru stressed that Tibet was no regular province of China, but an autonomous region within the People's Republic.³¹⁷

First and foremost, however, the Prime Minister gently tried to steer parliament and the public away from emotional overreactions. For the sake of the "peace of Asia and the world" he urged Indians and Chinese alike to avoid the infelicitous language of the cold war and underlined that "it would be a tragedy if the two great countries of Asia (...) which have been peaceful neighbours for ages past, should develop feelings of hostility against each other."³¹⁸ In fact, Nehru increasingly addressed two audiences simultaneously, the Indian people as well as the Chinese government. Both were paying close attention to his numerous public statements. While he was hardly able to significantly placate the sensitive Chinese, the Prime Minister was – importantly – still able to rein in or at least largely avoid the displeasure of Indian public opinion, which was quickly turning a cold shoulder to China and its brutal counter-insurgency tactics in Tibet. Nehru was in effect increasingly riding two horses at once and, for the time being, managed not to fall in between.

A vital precondition for this precarious balance had been the widespread use of confidentiality in border matters. Indeed, Nehru had deliberately withheld information from parliament on the development of the frontiers.³¹⁹ Neither the road in Aksai Chin, nor Zhou's

³¹⁵ Cf. Maxwell 1970/1997: 115

³¹⁶ Guha 2008: 305

³¹⁷ Statement in Lok Sabha, April 27, 1959, in: Nehru 1961; Garver 2001: 40–41

³¹⁸ Statement in Lok Sabha, April 27, 1959, in: Nehru 1961

³¹⁹ Prasad 1992: 35

January letter were publicly known. The main motive for this secrecy may be assumed to have sprung out of a *raison d'état* to ensure maximal diplomatic manoeuvrability vis-à-vis China. This was not least useful in the case of Aksai Chin where Nehru himself seemed doubtful of a foolproof Indian claim.³²⁰ As tensions grew on the newly militarised frontiers, reports of border incidents and Chinese incursions were still kept confidential to avoid public hysteria and in order to facilitate potential negotiations.³²¹ The turning point came with the skirmish at Longju in late August. With mounting pressure in the press and parliament, a fairly large incident like Longju made a strategy of continued confidentiality politically untenable. It would be difficult to hide from the public eye and would hence require explanations. Speaking in an agitated parliament on 28 August and on 4 September 1959, Nehru broke the silence and gave detailed statements on the general state of affairs of the Sino-Indian frontier – including the road in Aksai Chin. But he simultaneously stressed that it was not becoming of a major country like India to take action in anger, and that, in the larger interest of the nation, friendship with China must still be the objective.³²² The revelations nevertheless produced an intense reaction. While vigorously refusing angry calls made even by senior Congress members to "bomb the Chinese out of NEFA" or take Aksai Chin by force, Nehru did – most importantly – agree to a request from the Jana Sangh's Atal Bihari Vajpayee on 28 August to put all further cards on the public table.³²³ The subsequent decision to issue government white papers presumably containing all diplomatic documents and letters exchanged between India and China since 1954 was the decisive break with the confidential and discreet handling of the border question.

Along with Nehru's frank addresses to parliament after Longju, the white paper decision was an important turning point in the dynamics of the border conflict.³²⁴ From the issue of the first white paper on 7 September 1959, Indian China policy became increasingly influenced by domestic politics. More to the point, it severely curtailed the Prime Minister's room to act freely vis-à-vis China because he now constantly had to assess the domestic reception of all moves.³²⁵ Vice versa, the government's policy moves were in logical consequence increasingly calibrated to fit with the demands and expectations of the general public. The first white paper set the standard and was regularly followed by new ones, thus turning the development of Sino-Indian relations into a highly public process. A consequence

³²⁰ United States. CIA March 1963: 34; Raghavan 2010: 249

³²¹ Prasad 1992: 35

³²² United States. CIA March 1963: 30, 35

³²³ Hoffmann 1990: 67

³²⁴ Hoffmann 1990: 67–68; Guha 2008: 314

³²⁵ Raghavan 2010: 253

of this was that Nehru had a hard time riding the two horses of his China policy. The political power of commentators, journalists and opposition members increased at the cost of the government's executive discretion. In diplomatic communications with the Chinese, the government would have to consider the domestic implications of any message sent, whereas in communicating with the Indian public, the government would also have to consider Chinese reactions. Hence it became easy to disappoint both audiences simultaneously and impossible to satisfy both. By stressing the grand strategic demand for a peaceful relationship with China, Nehru risked estranging the frustrated electorate calling for retaliation. By conceding to bellicose rhetoric, he risked not only to break his own principles but also to turn a powerful and revolutionary China into the truly threatening neighbour he now feared it might become. The diminished room for nuances in public discourse made Nehru's sophisticated grand strategic approach more difficult to advocate.

Why did Nehru not stick to his guns and retain a protective lid of confidentiality? There is no evidence available that Nehru released white papers deliberately in order to pressure China under the cover of public opinion. Rather, the cognitive dissonance between the *Hindi-Chini bhai-bhai*-topos and actual happenings on the ground had become too pronounced to carry on with confidentiality as before Longju. Parliament was angered by the skirmish and felt deceived by the government's increasingly obvious secrecy. The release of more information, in short, appeared to be a political necessity. Nehru's respect for parliamentary democracy may have added a dimension of principle to the decision. Additionally, from a tactical point of view, the white papers would ostensibly demonstrate to the people that the government had in fact responded actively to the Chinese challenges.³²⁶

Contrary to what Nehru and his advisers might have expected, the effect of the 7 September white paper, combined with the revelations in parliament, was one of havoc in the press and severe criticism against the government's "soft" China policy.³²⁷ Even within his own party the Prime Minister had to contend with open criticism.³²⁸ Rather than convincing the general public of an active Indian approach, the new information added fuel to the fire of discontent. In a public relations perspective the timing of the Kongka Pass clash a couple of weeks later was therefore extraordinarily damaging for the image of China in India. Furthermore, it seriously discredited the Prime Minister's calls for a modest and measured Indian approach to the border question. Already provoked by Longju and the white paper

³²⁶ Raghavan 2010: 253

³²⁷ Hoffmann 1991: 68

³²⁸ Guha 2008: 327

revelations, the major incident at Kongka Pass seemed to constitute a point of no return in public opinion. Sino-Indian brotherhood was practically speaking dead as anger was roused to the "boiling point".³²⁹ In the belief that India would be capable of it, there were open calls for a military response against China in major national newspapers like the *Indian Express* and the *Hindustan Times*.³³⁰

Nehru now faced the delicate task of responding to China in a proportionate manner while at the same time calming the martial attitudes and "brave talk" of journalists and parliamentarians in New Delhi.³³¹ In his language he turned markedly firmer, but still both publicly and privately stressed the need to avoid a large scale conflict. In parliament the Prime Minister boldly pronounced that "if war is thrust upon us, we shall fight, and fight with all our strength" and reassured the house that "at no time since independence have our Defence Forces been in better condition, in finer fettle".³³² But he immediately toned down the statement by making clear that he would try to prevent war by all possible means.³³³ The sharpened tone in Nehru's discourse on China was not merely an instrumental concession to public opinion and future white papers, but also reflected Nehru's personal disappointment with the new course of Sino-Indian relations. But political pressure and personal disappointment did not mean that recourse to military pressure or armed conflict was an option. Again, no major policy moves were taken to follow up on the rhetorical sabre-rattling. The Chinese challenge was if anything first and foremost a long-term challenge that could only be countered by the development of the Indian economy and heavy industry.³³⁴

The initial impact of the domestic pressure on the government was thus manifested in sharper words rather than in actual policy initiatives. The pressure of public opinion would not, however, go away and for the democratically elected Congress government it was a force to reckon with. The border dispute was progressively ridden with the passions of popular nationalism. When Nehru after Kongka Pass emphatically stated that "you cannot barter your self-respect or honour", he very much reflected the emotions of a post-colonial nation in search for identity and unity.³³⁵ But when he soberly assessed Aksai Chin to be a barren wasteland of minor practical importance to India, he did not reflect those same emotions.³³⁶ From being an unknown naked desert in the high Himalayas, Aksai Chin rapidly acquired a

³²⁹ Mullik 1971: 243

³³⁰ United States. CIA March 1963: 42

³³¹ See United States. CIA March 1963: 42

³³² Speech in Lok Sabha, November 25, 1959, in: Nehru 1961

³³³ Speech in Lok Sabha, November 25, 1959, in: Nehru 1961

³³⁴ Cf. United States. CIA March 1963: 46

³³⁵ Speech in Lok Sabha, November 25, 1959, in: Nehru 1961

³³⁶ United States. CIA March 1963: 44

notion of holy soil and sacred motherland in the public sphere.³³⁷ The plateau became a symbol of the nation's pride and self-respect. This metamorphosis contributed to restrict the government's diplomatic scope of action. Nehru still appeared ambiguous with regards to the Indian claim to Aksai Chin, but that ambiguity was increasingly overshadowed by the vocal nationalism on India's domestic scene.³³⁸ At a private meeting in late 1959 Nehru is reported to have recognised the symbolic power of Aksai Chin and told his two interlocutors that "if I give them that I shall no longer be Prime Minister of India – I will not do it."³³⁹ Perhaps for the first time, Nehru's de facto foreign affairs monopoly was about to be broken. He was no longer free to define Indian China policy independent of public opinion, parliament and cabinet colleagues.³⁴⁰

(iii) The diplomatic response

The combination of external Chinese pressure and strong internal opposition contributed to undermine Nehru's flexibility on Aksai Chin. But it did not affect his preference for a peaceful and negotiated settlement of the dispute. According to the CIA, Zhou and Mao apparently shared this desire for a negotiated solution; at the time they considered increased tension with India as unfavourable to their international image and larger foreign policy interests.³⁴¹ The question, however, was on which preconditions negotiations were to take place. The parties only seemed able to agree on the principle of talking and on avoiding further clashes. Behind the formal phrases and calls for negotiations expressed in the diplomatic notes, the atmosphere for meaningful negotiations was slowly evaporating.

The core of Zhou's argument in the 8 September letter was that, pending formal negotiations on the delimitation, i.e. the cartographic location, *and* demarcation, i.e. the physical location of the border, the *status quo* must be maintained. That was to say: the current and actual position of the parties in the frontier areas must be respected to avoid new clashes and unilateral action.³⁴² "Greatly surprised and distressed", Nehru vehemently

³³⁷ See Misra 2007: 309

³³⁸ Before the clash at Kongka Pass, Nehru repeatedly stated in parliament that Aksai Chin was an uninhabited mountain region in which "it is not quite clear what the position is", thus very different from the McMahon line; see for example Nehru's statement in Lok Sabha, August 28, 1959, in: Nehru 1961. Nehru may thus have been preparing Indian opinion for potential negotiations with China regarding the ownership of the region; United States. CIA March 1963: 34

³³⁹ Reported by one of the three present at the meeting to Neville Maxwell 1970/1997: 161

³⁴⁰ Brown 2004: 320; see Kapur 2009: 69; Hoffmann 1990: 255

³⁴¹ United States. CIA August 1963: i

³⁴² Letter from the Prime Minister of China to the Prime Minister of India, 8 September 1959, in: White Paper II. The idea was first formulated in the letter from the Prime Minister of China to the Prime Minister of India, 23 January 1959, in: White Paper I

repudiated the allegation that no part of the frontier had been delimited.³⁴³ The Indian argument was that most parts of the frontier, and prominently the McMahon line, had indeed been delimited. It was agreed that it had not been properly demarcated, but that was a comparatively minor affair which could be settled amicably without throwing large areas of Indian territory into the melting pot of negotiation. Secondly, Nehru strongly disagreed with the Chinese notion of "status quo" as the actual present state and requested the Chinese premier to first "withdraw their personnel from a number of posts which you have opened in recent months".³⁴⁴ In the Indian reading "status quo" was an unclear notion in itself. An acknowledgement of Zhou's interpretation of status quo, it was feared, would be tantamount to legitimising the *fait accompli* established by recent Chinese occupation, especially in Ladakh.³⁴⁵ By *status quo*, India in effect referred to *status quo ante* and deemed that "no discussions can be fruitful unless the posts on the Indian side of the traditional frontier now held by the Chinese forces are first evacuated by them and further threats and intimidations immediately cease."³⁴⁶ In plain speaking, India would not negotiate unless China first pulled out of the areas which India considered Indian and which had been occupied by China over the preceding months – thus leaving a certain room for ambiguity on whether Aksai Chin itself had to be evacuated along with the newer Chinese posts elsewhere in Ladakh.³⁴⁷ The formulation of this precondition for discussions was significant, not least because it crystallised into a more or less permanent Indian stance that would be recapitulated up to the outbreak of war in 1962.³⁴⁸

The correspondence between the two prime ministers continued throughout 1959 and early 1960, but brought little new to the fore. The argumentation was repetitive and the clash at Kongka Pass contributed to limit Nehru's political scope of action and his early pragmatism on Aksai Chin. Both parties tried to avoid further border clashes by restricting patrol activity, but on the subject of negotiations the prospects looked rather meagre.³⁴⁹ Zhou's suggestion of a 20 km buffer zone on each side of the line of actual control was rejected on the same grounds that his earlier suggestion of merely retaining the *status quo* had also been

³⁴³ Letter from the Prime Minister of India to the Prime Minister of China, 26 September 1959, in: White Paper II

³⁴⁴ Letter from the Prime Minister of India to the Prime Minister of China, 26 September 1959, in: White Paper II

³⁴⁵ Mullik 1971: 235; see also Maxwell 1970/1997: 102

³⁴⁶ Letter from the Prime Minister of India to the Prime Minister of China, 26 September 1959, in: White Paper II

³⁴⁷ United States. CIA March 1963: 39

³⁴⁸ United States. CIA March 1963: 39

³⁴⁹ See letter from the Prime Minister of India to the Prime Minister of China, 16 November 1959, in: White Paper III

rejected.³⁵⁰ India answered in kind by calling for a Chinese withdrawal to the international border as interpreted by India, and would in exchange pull back to the claim line stated in Chinese maps of 1956.³⁵¹ The Indian suggestion would in fact entail a major Chinese retreat, including from the Aksai Chin road, while India would only have to pull back from a few marginal areas. It was hence rejected in a letter from Zhou to Nehru in which the idea was described as "absolutely unconvincing".³⁵² From the Chinese point of view, it was a telling fact that India had not been in actual occupation of the land it claimed to be Indian. From India's point of view, the Chinese intrusion could not *ipso facto* be considered legal just because India had not registered it to begin with.³⁵³

Nehru expressed "great shock" while Zhou wrote of "extreme regret" in the correspondence.³⁵⁴ The diplomatic effort in the wake of Longju and Kongka Pass seemed to have run out of steam. Nehru saw no realistic chance of reaching an agreement "where there is such complete disagreement about the facts."³⁵⁵ After having read China's first detailed defence of its border interpretation dated 26 December 1959, Nehru wrote to Zhou that he did not see "for the moment (...) any common ground between our respective viewpoints."³⁵⁶

The decision to meet

With Nehru's negative assessment fresh in mind, the following paragraph may well have been surprising reading for the Chinese premier:

Nevertheless I think we should make every effort to explore avenues which might lead to a peaceful settlement. Although any negotiations on the basis you have suggested are not possible, still I think it might be helpful for us to meet. (...) You will be our honoured guest when you come here.³⁵⁷

³⁵⁰ Letter from the Prime Minister of China to the Prime Minister of India, 7 November 1959, in: White Paper III; letter from the Prime Minister of India to the Prime Minister of China, 16 November 1959, in: White Paper III

³⁵¹ Letter from the Prime Minister of India to the Prime Minister of China, 16 November 1959, in: White Paper III

³⁵² Letter from the Prime Minister of China to the Prime Minister of India, 17 December 1959, in: White Paper III

³⁵³ See letter from the Prime Minister of India to the Prime Minister of China, 21 December 1959, in: White Paper III

³⁵⁴ Letter from the Prime Minister of China to the Prime Minister of India, 17 December 1959, in: White Paper III

³⁵⁵ Letter from the Prime Minister of India to the Prime Minister of China, 21 December 1959, in: White Paper III

³⁵⁶ Letter from the Prime Minister of India to the Prime Minister of China, 5 February 1960, in: White Paper III For the details of the Chinese argument (finally responding to Nehru's detailed letter of 26 September 1959) see note given by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China to the Embassy of India in China, 26 December 1959, in: White Paper III

³⁵⁷ Letter from the Prime Minister of India to the Prime Minister of China, 5 February 1960, in: White Paper III

Nehru was in effect offering to see Zhou in New Delhi within a few months time – without preconditions. Although it was made painstakingly clear that the meeting could not be considered as "negotiations", the new signals from India seemed no less than a major deviation from the policy expounded since September 1959. Zhou was "very glad" to accept.³⁵⁸

Why did Nehru give up demanding Chinese concessions as a precondition to meet? The answer is contingent upon how the Indian proposal of "talks" is interpreted. At least three motives can be considered in the decision: a tactical, a conciliatory and an international. From the Chinese point of view the suggestion of unconditional talks seems to have been interpreted more in terms of negotiations than of a mere "meeting". The Indians were quite surprised when they found out that Zhou planned to bring a large delegation with him to Delhi in April 1960 – for no less than six days.³⁵⁹ Beijing thus seems to have had fairly large expectations for the visit. The Chinese may have thought that Nehru publicly said "talks" as a sop to public opinion, but in reality meant negotiations. The Indian inclination to portray the meeting as something lesser than negotiations could indeed reasonably be seen to follow from the popular pressure and ire ignited by the turbulence since March 1959.³⁶⁰ On the other hand, while it is undoubtedly true that the idea of explicitly renouncing earlier preconditions in order to negotiate would have been frowned upon in parliament and the press, this approach ran the risk of underestimating Nehru's growing personal suspicion with Chinese motives. Indeed, it may have been Nehru's primary goal to talk with Zhou to understand him and the Chinese position better, rather than to actually negotiate.³⁶¹ Nehru's suggestion to meet may have been more of a tactical initiative in an otherwise frozen situation than a sign of substantial thaw in the Indian position.³⁶² Given that Zhou in fact encountered little Indian flexibility, the tactical motive seems to be confirmed at least as a partial motivation for Nehru's 5 February initiative.³⁶³

If Nehru had not necessarily meant "negotiations" by inviting Zhou on 5 February, he did nevertheless express a genuine desire for peaceful settlement. The peaceful resolution of the border dispute was inherently more important than the borders per se: it was the key to re-establish Sino-Indian relations on an even keel and to proceed on the long way towards the Asia Nehru had envisioned. India's official history portrays Nehru's decision to drop

³⁵⁸ Letter from the Prime Minister of China to the Prime Minister of India, 26 February 1960, in: White Paper III

³⁵⁹ United States. CIA August 1963: iv

³⁶⁰ United States. CIA August 1963: iii

³⁶¹ United States. CIA August 1963: iv

³⁶² See Foreign Secretary Dutt's analysis in: United States. CIA August 1963: 39

³⁶³ See Raghavan 2010: 264

preconditions in light of the desire for peace and friendship with China – even at a time when India, according to the government historians, had been wronged by Chinese forward movements on the frontier.³⁶⁴ Writing to a member of parliament before the meeting, the Prime Minister stressed that talking to adversaries had run like a thread through his career both before and after independence and that Zhou would be no exception.³⁶⁵ Talks did not guarantee improvement, but neither was there much to lose. Nehru was deeply convinced that India had the better over-all argument and may have considered it possible to exert some moral and intellectual pressure on Zhou by demonstrating the logic of the Indian position. It may also have been a motive to make Zhou personally feel how passionately the border question was seen in India.³⁶⁶ At the very least, a meeting might give the Chinese a better understanding of India's position.³⁶⁷

Finally, Nehru's decision to meet Zhou can be understood in an international perspective. Independent of the underlying motives for inviting Zhou to New Delhi, a visible effort to solve the dispute by peaceful means would be appreciated in an international community which was beginning to pay attention after the clashes of 1959.³⁶⁸ More particularly the Soviet Union, which had friendly relations with both India and China, saw the border dispute as destructive.³⁶⁹ Speaking to an international correspondent, Khrushchev discredited the story as "sad and stupid", particularly since Aksai Chin was an unpopulated wasteland.³⁷⁰ The concerned Soviet attitude was repeated on numerous occasions to Indian officials and to the leading politicians of both India and China. During Nehru's talks with Khrushchev on 12 February 1960, the Soviet leader emphasised that

we would not like our relations with either of our two friends to cool off (...) Our warmest wishes are that this conflict may come to an end as soon as possible and in a manner which will be to the satisfaction of all concerned. This conflict is a sop to the aggressive forces (...)³⁷¹

Nehru assured him that India strove for a peaceful and friendly solution. He underlined that "for the moment there is no basis for negotiations", but – to Khrushchev's pleasure – added

³⁶⁴ Prasad 1992: 53

³⁶⁵ Letter from Nehru to MP Shri Khushwaqt Rai, 4. April 1960, in: P. N. Haksar Papers, 1 & 2 instalments, subject file 25 (1960), NMML

³⁶⁶ According to CIA sources, Zhou Enlai ran into a "stone wall of opposition" while in India. United States. CIA August 1963: v

³⁶⁷ Hoffmann 1990: 85

³⁶⁸ See for example: Record of a talk on December 18, 1959, between the Prime Minister and Mr. Erlander, Prime Minister of Sweden, in: Subimal Dutt Papers, subject file 39, NMML

³⁶⁹ United States. CIA August 1963: 20

³⁷⁰ The remarks were published in *New Age* on 15 November, 1959, see United States. CIA August 1963: 21

³⁷¹ Record of PM's talk with Mr. Khrushchev on 12th February, 1960, in: Subimal Dutt Papers, subject file 24, NMML

that a personal meeting would be "generally helpful".³⁷² Soviet pressure on Indian diplomats also seems to have precipitated the meeting. Indeed, the decision to meet Zhou was taken in mid-January after Nehru's conference with his ambassadors to Beijing and Moscow.³⁷³ They both pressed for negotiations with China, albeit for different reasons. While the ambassador to Beijing, Parthasarathy, emphasised the need to minimise short-term challenges in order to be able to focus on development and meet the long-term challenges from China, the ambassador to Moscow stressed the Soviet perspective and signals from the Kremlin that "India should not make it too hard for the Chinese to come to an agreement."³⁷⁴ Nehru was sensitive to Soviet signals as he was most probably informed of the emerging cracks between Beijing and Moscow.³⁷⁵ Conceivably, the Soviet Union could become a discreet, but most influential supporter of India in the border dispute. Nehru was however also sensitive to the diplomatic pressure that the Chinese were deliberately putting on India by means of their hastily concluded border agreements with Burma on 28 January and, two months later, with Nepal on 11 March 1960.³⁷⁶ India must not be made to appear recalcitrant, and must hence talk with the Chinese.

Home Minister Pant objected to the meeting, but the Prime Minister stressed that the act of seeing each other did not imply policy alterations.³⁷⁷ With rumours in the press that Nehru and Krishna Menon in fact wanted to cede Aksai Chin in return for Chinese acceptance of the McMahon line, it was highly necessary for Nehru to communicate a message of firmness to the Indian public, too.³⁷⁸ While flexibility and reasonableness was the intended message to the international community, firmness and consistency was promised to the Indian audience.

Meetings in New Delhi, 19–25 April 1960

Although the government had taken great care to emphasise the limited scope and nature of the meetings, Nehru's 5 February letter with the invitation to meet without preconditions was furiously criticised in the newspapers. The parallel to Munich 1938 was frequently drawn.³⁷⁹ On 16 February, the *Times of India* wrote of "nourishing dangerous illusions", while

³⁷² Record of PM's talk with Mr. Krushchev on 12th February, 1960, in: Subimal Dutt Papers, subject file 24, NMML

³⁷³ United States. CIA August 1963: 19

³⁷⁴ United States. CIA August 1963: 20

³⁷⁵ Cf. with ambassador K. P. S. Menon's slightly later Annual Political Report for the Year 1960, Embassy of India (Moscow) to MEA, submitted on 05.01.1961, in: K. P. S. Menon Papers, subject file 25, NMML

³⁷⁶ United States. CIA August 1963: iv, 24, 42

³⁷⁷ United States. CIA August 1963: 24

³⁷⁸ United States. CIA August 1963: 40

³⁷⁹ Maxwell 1970/1997: 157; Brown 2004: 321

Hindustan Standard referred to the decision as an insult to the parliament and the country.³⁸⁰ The tone did not improve as Zhou arrived in India on 19 April. He was officially received with pomp and circumstance, but the public reception was far from what it had been when he visited in the brotherly mid-50s. In fact, he was greeted with demonstrators carrying black flags, scornful media coverage and an oppositional "no surrender week" to run in parallel with the meetings.³⁸¹ The strained atmosphere was also manifested in the talks. In brief, they were an almost utter failure.³⁸² The Chinese premier was given a series of repetitive "lectures" not only by Nehru personally, but even by his "old friend" Krishna Menon, by other ministers and by vice-president Radhakrishnan – all generally reflecting the Indian feeling of having been betrayed by a trusted friend.³⁸³ Zhou was not able to make any new impression on the Indian policy makers. Nor were the Indians able to secure a Chinese withdrawal from Ladakh.

The most striking feature of the talks was the Chinese effort to secure a settlement based on the lines of actual control. It was suggested that China could formally recognise the McMahon line – as indeed they had recognised the McMahon line's extension in Burma in January – in return for India's recognition *de jure* of China's *de facto* control in north-eastern Ladakh.³⁸⁴ India disagreed with the interlinkage of the two issues and maintained that there could be no "horse-trading" of that kind.³⁸⁵ Indian diplomats were told by the Foreign Secretary a few days later that the government had "disagreed with the Chinese on every single point."³⁸⁶ The Indian position was that the delimitation of the McMahon line was impeccable and that consequently there was nothing to discuss apart from minor adjustments on the ground. In Ladakh, on the other hand, there may have been room for discussion with China, but not for unilateral Chinese occupation – and for the Indians there was definitely not room for interlinking territorial claims to Aksai Chin with the blatantly illegal and unreasonable Chinese claims in NEFA. There was, in short, an emerging mental perception of China as a kind of thief promising not to steal again if only the first theft could be forgiven.³⁸⁷

³⁸⁰ United States. CIA August 1963: 38

³⁸¹ Guha 2008: 316–317; Maxwell 1970/1997: 151, 155–156; Raghavan 2010: 262

³⁸² Prasad 1992: 55–56; United States. CIA August 1963: v, 48; Hoffmann 1990: 88; Maxwell 1970/1997: 169; Guha 2008: 317

³⁸³ United States. CIA August 1963: 46

³⁸⁴ Immediate top-secret message from Foreign Secretary to heads of missions 27.04.1960, in: P. N. Haksar papers, 1 & 2 instalments, subject file 25 (1960), NMML; United States. CIA August 1963: 47

³⁸⁵ Hoffmann 1990: 87

³⁸⁶ Immediate top-secret message from Foreign Secretary to heads of missions 27.04.1960, in: P. N. Haksar papers, 1 & 2 instalments, subject file 25 (1960), NMML

³⁸⁷ See Hoffmann 1990: 86–87; Maxwell 1970/1997: 161

One of the few face-saving outcomes of the meetings was the fact that the planned six day schedule had been observed and followed in correct forms.³⁸⁸ Apart from the superficial aspect, the only substantial agreement was that the two governments would keep a dialogue going on the border issue through a joint commission of officials. The joint commission would be constituted by civil servants from both countries and would in the course of three sessions from June to December 1960 present a joint report to the governments with detailed historical-legal analyses of their respective border claims.³⁸⁹ However, the Indians were not certain "whether Chinese will implement this agreement sincerely" and did not place much faith in it.³⁹⁰ The single most significant outcome of the April meetings in New Delhi was the strong notion that any "prospect of reasonable settlement is [not] even remotely in sight."³⁹¹

(iv) Indian perceptions and positions harden

As Zhou left India, the diplomatic atmosphere had reached a low point.³⁹² The Indian public reception was even critical of the diplomatic effort itself; in the words of the leader of the oppositional Swatantra party, Nehru was simply wasting valuable time while the Chinese were progressively "soiling our motherland with their cancerous fingers".³⁹³ The agreement to have a joint border commission only aggravated this criticism in a public that expected some kind of practical action to be taken. There was no prospect of quick progress. Both parties retained their former positions of a settlement based respectively on *status quo* and *status quo ante*. India had in fact arrived at a diplomatic impasse. Nevertheless it was not necessarily the failure of the talks in itself that had led to the impasse. Rather, the meetings openly manifested the wide gap between the Indian and Chinese positions. It is highly unlikely that the April talks had any chance of success to begin with.³⁹⁴ Nehru had certainly not expressed any substantial hope for the talks and, according to foreign secretary Dutt, "did not expect anything tangible to come out of a meeting with Chou" apart from a better understanding of the Chinese position and, "at best", a basis for further talks.³⁹⁵ India's way into the impasse of 1960 seems rather to have gone via a long drawn process of hardening perceptions of Aksai

³⁸⁸ This could not be taken for granted. After receiving a Chinese note dated 3 April which reiterated the same argument as in Zhou's letters, Nehru considered breaking off talks after only two days. United States. CIA August 1963: 44–45

³⁸⁹ Hoffmann 1990: 88

³⁹⁰ Immediate top-secret message from Foreign Secretary to heads of missions 27.04.1960, in: P. N. Haksar papers, 1 & 2 instalments, subject file 25 (1960), NMML

³⁹¹ Immediate top-secret message from Foreign Secretary to heads of missions 27.04.1960, in: P. N. Haksar papers, 1 & 2 instalments, subject file 25 (1960), NMML

³⁹² United States. CIA August 1963: 50

³⁹³ Ranga quoted in Maxwell 1970/1997: 169; Misra 2007: 309

³⁹⁴ Hoffmann 1990: 88

³⁹⁵ United States. CIA August 1963: 38

Chin, and secondly, via a growing sense of suspicion with regard to the reliability of the Chinese. Together these perceptions crystallised into a relatively inflexible Indian attitude and diplomatic position prior to the talks in April. When the Indian perceptions and positions collided with those of the Chinese during the talks, the result was a frigid diplomatic impasse and no substantial change.

The metamorphoses of Aksai Chin

Aksai Chin was one of the main ingredients of the diplomatic blunder. The desolate plains were subject to two important mental metamorphoses prior to the talks. As already discussed, the unknown mountain plateau quickly turned into a symbol of national pride in public opinion after August 1959. This first metamorphosis added popular pressure to the government's handling of the Aksai Chin question. But additionally, and in analytical terms separate from the popular transformation of Aksai Chin into a symbol, Nehru's personal perception of the area was also subject to change. After Longju, while the dispute was still ostensibly within the government's political control, Nehru repeatedly described Aksai Chin as a barren wasteland in public. Although indirectly, he effectively questioned India's claim to the territory.³⁹⁶ In contrast to the McMahon line which was described as non-negotiable, Nehru seems in fact to have been preparing parliament for a potential cession of the un-administered areas of Ladakh – in other words for a formal recognition of the Chinese *fait accompli*.³⁹⁷ The idea seems to have had intellectual backing not only from defence minister Krishna Menon, but also from the chief of army staff, general Thimayya; he regarded the areas outside the Karakoram range as "militarily indefensible" – even if the Chinese had not been in actual occupation.³⁹⁸

In any case, no explicit suggestion of a cession was ever made, either to parliament or to the Chinese. Moreover, after the 1962 war, even the existence of considerations to that effect was promptly discharged as fictitious.³⁹⁹ The idea of negotiating on Aksai Chin is certainly not mentioned in India's official history of the border conflict.⁴⁰⁰ Nevertheless, both American diplomats, vice-president Radhakrishnan and high ranking bureaucrats like foreign secretary Subimal Dutt suspected Nehru of harbouring the idea at the time.⁴⁰¹ Indeed, so did the Chinese who during the talks in 1960 had expected more Indian flexibility on Aksai Chin

³⁹⁶ See Raghavan 2010: 253

³⁹⁷ United States. CIA March 1963: 51

³⁹⁸ United States. CIA March 1963: 51–52

³⁹⁹ Cf. interview with Krishna Menon in Brecher 1968: 151

⁴⁰⁰ Prasad 1992

⁴⁰¹ United States. CIA March 1963: 51

than actually turned out to be the case.⁴⁰² In fact, Nehru was himself reported by the British journalist Kingsley Martin to have said in early April 1960 that "in certain circumstances I would not have minded giving away a little bit of Ladakh, but I do not want the Chinese to take me for a sucker. Chou En-lai has lied to me so often that I do not feel like trusting him any more."⁴⁰³ Whether or not Nehru was seriously considering to cede Aksai Chin to China, it is thus clearly the case that his view of Aksai Chin in August 1959 was far more ambiguous than during the meetings with Zhou in April 1960.

What happened in between? Nehru's statements on Ladakh and Aksai Chin grew markedly wearier of public furore after the major clash at Kongka Pass in October 1959.⁴⁰⁴ Partly, the angry mood in the press and parliament forced Nehru to mind his step. Furthermore, significant actors within the government were now also working for a tougher line. President Prasad, for example, pressed Nehru to sharpen the tone in a note of 4 November to the Chinese on the grounds that it "lacked firmness".⁴⁰⁵ Nehru personally grew more suspicious of the Chinese, but he did not necessarily abandon his nuanced view of Aksai Chin – despite a façade of rhetorical firmness. A cousin of the Prime Minister, the high ranking diplomat and former ambassador to Beijing (1955–1958) R. K. Nehru, later claimed that up to 1960 "we ourselves were not sure that the territory belonged to us and we were thinking in terms of giving up our claims as part of a satisfactory settlement."⁴⁰⁶ It was not until February 1960 that the Prime Minister told his cabinet colleagues that he was convinced of India's legal and historical claim to Aksai Chin.⁴⁰⁷ To a large extent this was the outcome of the director of the MEA historical division, Sarvepalli Gopal, who returned from archival research in Britain in late 1959. Gopal, who was himself convinced that India had a sound argument, found Nehru in a "malleable mood".⁴⁰⁸ His mental flexibility and will to compromise with China had been undercut by the tumultuous autumn of 1959.⁴⁰⁹ Together, Gopal and the historically minded Prime Minister went through India's case in detail in February 1960. From that time, the political notion of having been wronged by China in autumn 1959 was paired with a sense of historical and legal justification for India's case. In

⁴⁰² United States. CIA August 1963: 45–46

⁴⁰³ Nehru quoted by Kingsley Martin in United States. CIA August 1963: 45

⁴⁰⁴ Raghavan 2010: 258

⁴⁰⁵ United States. CIA March 1963: 52

⁴⁰⁶ Raghavan 2010: 261; India & China: Policy Alternatives, undated, in: R. K. Nehru papers, NMML

⁴⁰⁷ Hoffmann 1990: 83. Hoffmann's account is based on personal interviews with Sarvepalli Gopal in March and April 1983.

⁴⁰⁸ Hoffmann 1990: 82

⁴⁰⁹ See Hoffmann 1990: 82; Raghavan 2010: 260

combination this pointed in the direction of diplomatic firmness on Ladakh, vigorously encouraged by public opinion and internal pressure in the government.

Nevertheless, if Zhou in April 1960 had offered the Indian government leeway on Aksai Chin in the form of some kind of shadow acceptance of Indian sovereignty, there might potentially still have been room for a compromise solution. This must, however, remain speculations so long as there are no sources indicating that the suggestion was in fact raised with Zhou during the talks. Contrafactually speaking, it is highly improbable that Nehru would have survived the wrath of Indian public opinion and the political establishment had he formally ceded Aksai Chin to China.⁴¹⁰ But it is equally uncertain if Zhou would have accepted Indian "shadow" sovereignty in Ladakh if the suggestion had in fact been raised.⁴¹¹ In sum, the talks of April 1960 did not alter India's position or policy in any significant fashion. Instead, it openly demonstrated the by now rigid Indian demands for *status quo ante* and left the disillusioned Chinese with an unfulfilled and equally hardened demand for a settlement based on *status quo*.

A trust betrayed?

The joint commission may partly have been intended as a sort of face-saving compensation for the diplomatic deadlock. If anything, however, it actually contributed to widen the perceptual crevasse between the two parties. The Indian team saw its suspicions confirmed when the Chinese presented a new and more detailed map of their border claims. In fact, the new claim line had swung further into Indian claimed territory compared to China's 1956 claim line and incorporated 2000 additional square miles to the 50 000 square miles already claimed by Zhou on 8 September 1959.⁴¹² As Zhou had told Nehru that the 1956 line was authoritative and as the Chinese team insisted that there was no difference between the two lines, Indian apprehensions increased.⁴¹³ Apart from what India claimed had been a fresh instance of cartographic aggression, the end result of the commission was a massive report published by the Government of India in February 1961.⁴¹⁴ In fact it consisted of two separate reports repeating the gist of the established positions in unprecedented rigour and detail.

⁴¹⁰ See Raghavan 2010: 262

⁴¹¹ A Chinese military attaché in East Germany is reported to have told a western journalist that China could in fact be willing to discuss a special solution for Ladakh – but only pending formal Indian recognition of China's view that the area was an historically disputed territory. Furthermore, China would "under no circumstances" withdraw from the road. United States. CIA August 1963: 41

⁴¹² Prasad 1992: 56–58

⁴¹³ Raghavan 2010: 266

⁴¹⁴ India. Ministry of External Affairs (1961) *Report of the Officials of the Governments of India and the People's Republic of China on the Boundary Question*, Government of India Press, New Delhi

India's case was generally perceived as better documented and argued than the Chinese equivalent.⁴¹⁵ The Chinese chose not to publish the report. Nehru on the other hand felt self-assured enough to publicly describe India's case as almost "foolproof", thus hammering the last nail in the coffin of China's desired *status quo* solution.⁴¹⁶

No real attempt was made to follow up on the report of the officials with new diplomatic initiatives. En route from Mongolia, the senior diplomat R. K. Nehru did however visit Beijing in July 1961 to probe the atmosphere. As none of the parties were prepared to abandon their diplomatic trenches, the probe ended in false smiles and no yields.⁴¹⁷ It rather cemented the mutual perception of monotonous rigidity. The diplomats had indeed reached a deadlock from which it seemed difficult to imagine any proximate exit.

Conclusion

India's road to the near total diplomatic stalemate in July 1961 was dotted with numerous external and internal obstacles. In short, the year 1959 turned out to be the *annus horribilis* of the Prime Minister's highly prioritised Sino-Indian friendship.⁴¹⁸ In hindsight the newly discovered Chinese road in Aksai Chin and Chou's letter of 23 January 1959, with its rejection of any implicit recognition of India's colonial era frontiers, seem to mark a turning point in the border question. Nevertheless, it was not until after a major revolt in Lhasa broke out that a dispute was triggered. The Tibetan crisis and the border dispute escalated in tandem. The external pressure from China in the form of more frequent and larger incidents on the frontier combined with Zhou's explicit 8 September letter. Seen together these developments greatly distressed the Prime Minister and the government and seriously undermined Indian trust in the reliability of the Chinese.

Most importantly perhaps, the abrupt announcement of the dispute to the public after August 1959 unleashed an unexpectedly strong reaction in parliament, press and public opinion in general. Nehru's dominance in foreign affairs was effectively undermined in an historically unprecedented fashion. In parallel with the public metamorphosis of Aksai Chin into an emotional national symbol, Nehru in the wake of the major clash at Kongka Pass gradually abandoned his initial pragmatism on the mountain plateau. By February 1960, he perceived India's legal-historical case in Chinese occupied Ladakh to be "foolproof". Combined with Nehru's sense of a betrayed trust, the newly evolved position on Aksai Chin

⁴¹⁵ United States. CIA August 1963: 67–73

⁴¹⁶ Hoffmann 1990: 83

⁴¹⁷ Hoffmann 1990: 90–91

⁴¹⁸ Brown 2004: 319

made his mental attitude and India's diplomatic positions in the controversial April talks of 1960 almost as rigid as the activists in the "no surrender week" may have wished for. In many ways, the outcome of the talks was given before they had even commenced. India declined China's discreet suggestions of a swap, while China continued to refuse India's demand for a formal recognition of the McMahon line combined with a withdrawal from Aksai Chin.

Over the period from autumn 1959 to summer 1961, Nehru had thus lost his faith in a genuine friendship with China. By 1961 he was in many ways a disappointed man. But he still remained firmly wedded to the analysis that China only represented a potential long-term challenge to India. China was not perceived as an immediate military threat by the Indian cabinet, despite the failure of diplomacy.

On the other hand, India's relationship to China continued to be hostage to an increasingly tense atmosphere, both within government circles and in the public sphere. The new Chinese claim line of 1960 added to the malcontent. There was a rising pressure for some kind of action to be taken as talking had quite obviously led nowhere. In short, India was in need of a new approach to China and the frozen border dispute.

III

The Forward Policy Decision

The glaring failure of the 1960 talks cemented the mutual feeling of having reached a diplomatic deadlock. As Zhou finally left for Beijing, China remained in actual occupation of 12,000 square miles of Indian claimed land in Ladakh. Since September 1959 Beijing furthermore laid verbal claim to over 50,000 square miles, including territories south of the established McMahon line in NEFA.⁴¹⁹ The sense of "cartographic aggression" escalated with new claims on the Chinese map presented in 1960.⁴²⁰ The domestic pressure on Nehru grew stronger as it became apparent that talking had been insufficient to "liberate" Aksai Chin. China would clearly not comply voluntarily with India's historical and legal approach to the border question. Neither would India kow-tow to the Chinese *fait accompli* in Ladakh or succumb to further realpolitik from Beijing. During the course of 1961 all these elements combined to form a growing demand that India should answer in kind and pursue its own brand of realpolitik vis-à-vis China. War was no option in the eyes of the government. But neither was passive observance of creeping Chinese expansion. Time seemed ripe for a "third solution". By late 1961 the contours of a fresh initiative emerged. It would neither be fish nor fowl, combining the diplomatic pressure with a new and proactive military component. By 1962, small detachments of Indian troops systematically established symbolic "forward posts" deeply within disputed areas, most especially in Ladakh. This is what came to be known as the Forward Policy.

A definite decision on the subject was made by the Prime Minister in a cabinet meeting on 2 November 1961.⁴²¹ But within what context and organisational frameworks was the Forward Policy conceptualised? What were the analytical premises of the Forward Policy decision and what were Nehru's intentions with it? In order to analyse the Forward Policy decision in a "narrow" sense, the precedents of the policy from 1950 onwards – arguably forward policy in a "broad" sense – will be outlined first. Secondly, the internal and external context in which the Government of India was operating in late 1961 will be discussed.

⁴¹⁹ Prasad 1992: 56

⁴²⁰ Prasad 1992: 58; Hoffmann 1990: 89; Raghavan 2010: 266

⁴²¹ Neville Maxwell (1970/1997: 221–222) first cited the operational directive that emerged from the 2 November meeting. The secret document was leaked to him by unknown sources within the Government of India. Maxwell's citation has been deemed authentic and is not only referred to in most other accounts of the conflict, but is also confirmed by the Government of India's official history; Prasad 1992: 68, 86, note 89

Thirdly, an analysis of the Forward Policy decision proper on 2 November will be given, followed by a summary outline of its subsequent implementation in the field.

(i) Policy precedents

Established interpretations of the Forward Policy can roughly be placed in two categories. On the one side, there is the majority approach that broadly perceives Nehru's 2 November decision and its implications as something qualitatively new in Indian China policy.⁴²² On the other side there are also interpretations that primarily describe the Forward Policy in terms of a logical and partly even inevitable continuum of a process already set in motion.⁴²³ Interestingly, both Neville Maxwell's critical revisionist account and the Government of India's official history can be placed within the second category. In most other respects these two analyses can be said to be fundamentally opposed. They reach opposite conclusions and interpret the continuum in two widely different manners.

Maxwell argues that the Forward Policy was merely the physical manifestation of a rigid and unilateral mindset that had been prevalent in New Delhi since the eruption of the border dispute in the first place. India's policy was in fact obdurate long before November 1961 and the Forward Policy was hence more of a crescendo than a break with past policy. "Collision course" was already set in the early 1950s.⁴²⁴ Maxwell ultimately blames India for provoking the 1962 war which he succinctly describes as "India's China war".⁴²⁵ On a rare note of agreement, India's official history argues that "there was nothing new in this [2 November] directive (...) What happened now was that the directive coming directly from the Prime Minister speeded up the implementation process."⁴²⁶ In fact, the policy – which according to the Indian government can only mistakenly be called "forward" – emerged in logical extension of the Army's take-over in Ladakh after October 1959.⁴²⁷ In stark contrast to Maxwell's version, the driving force is not considered to be unilateral Indian policy making, but Chinese aggression in Ladakh. In other words, the "Forward" Policy is seen as a natural continuation of the Army's defence of Indian territory. It was China that had initiated the dispute by secretly occupying Aksai Chin; India merely reacted in defence.⁴²⁸ Although the

⁴²² See for example Hoffmann 1990; Raghavan 2010; Guha 2008: 312–313; Brown 2004: 320; United States. CIA May 1964

⁴²³ See Prasad 1992 and Maxwell 1970/1997. In particular part II of Maxwell's book (p. 171–257) deals specifically with the Forward Policy.

⁴²⁴ Maxwell 1970/1997: 134, 226

⁴²⁵ Maxwell 1970/1997

⁴²⁶ Prasad 1992: 68

⁴²⁷ Prasad 1992: 86, note 89

⁴²⁸ Prasad 1992

analyses of Maxwell and the Government of India thus concur in seeing the Forward Policy decision as a continuation of an already existing policy their arguments are entirely different. Maxwell, in brief, argues that India was aggressive to begin with whereas the Government of India stresses that India reacted defensively right from the start. Hence they also describe the policy in itself differently – either as aggressive or as defensive.

Forward policy in a "broad" sense

Unlike Maxwell and the official history, the majority of analyses portray the Forward Policy decision more in terms of a turning point than as a mere continuation of Indian policy. The analysis of the 2 November decision as something qualitatively new in Indian China policy does not however mean that it came out of the blue. It partly built on policy roots from the 1950s. It is therefore relevant to ask to what extent there had been taken specific measures before 2 November 1961 that pointed in the direction of a forward policy. Does it make sense to speak of an early forward policy in a "broad" sense as opposed to the Forward Policy in a "narrow" sense sanctioned by the Prime Minister in November 1961? Two specific cases will be considered in this regard: firstly India's defence reactions to the demise of the Tibetan buffer and, secondly, the Intelligence Bureau's (IB) response to the 1958 discovery of the Chinese road in Aksai Chin.

The militarisation of the Tibetan border was primarily but not only driven by China.⁴²⁹ The Government of India had indeed taken a number of initiatives to improve its control over the frontier areas since the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950. Although the Prime Minister rejected Vallabhbhai Patel's stern warnings that India faced a Chinese military threat in the Himalayan region, he did not entirely exclude the possibility of negative repercussions in the frontier areas.⁴³⁰ In November 1950 the Prime Minister admitted that

While there is, in any opinion, practically no chance of a major attack on India by China, there are certainly chances of gradual infiltration across our borders and possibly of entering and taking possession of disputed territory, if there is no obstruction to this happening. We must therefore take all necessary precautions to prevent this. But, again, we must differentiate between these precautions and those that might be necessary to meet a real attack (...) If we really feared an attack and had to make full provision for it, this would cast an intolerable burden on us, financial and otherwise, and it would weaken our general defence position (...) the fact remains that our major possible enemy is Pakistan.⁴³¹

Nehru thus took a different view on the potential Chinese threat from that expounded by Patel, but was not neglecting potential challenges in the isolated frontier areas. The North

⁴²⁹ United States. CIA 2 March 1963: 29; see also Hoffmann (1990: 75) for IB activities in Ladakh

⁴³⁰ The November 1950 exchange of arguments between Nehru and Patel can be accessed in Patel 1974: 335–347

⁴³¹ Nehru's note on China and Tibet, 18 November 1950 in Patel 1974: 344

Eastern Frontier Agency (NEFA) was a particular source of concern given that the local inhabitants had weak historical ties to New Delhi and a long common history with Tibet.⁴³² Measures would therefore be taken, but – importantly – commensurate to the minor issue that the potential Chinese challenge constituted in the total picture of Nehru's grand strategy. Among the first steps was to establish the so-called Himmatsinhji-committee which was charged with recommending "measures that should be taken to improve administration, defence, communication, etc. of all the frontier areas".⁴³³ In September 1951 the committee submitted a report which called for a comprehensive set of measures such as widespread construction of infrastructure in the isolated frontier areas as well as establishment of new border checkpoints to show the Indian tricolour. By the end of 1952, 30 such checkpoints had been established, manned either by police or paramilitary Assam Rifles in the middle and eastern sectors and by IB directed personnel in the western Ladakh sector.⁴³⁴ Crucially, among the seven checkpoints established by the IB in Ladakh, none were placed further north-east than the Karakoram mountains.⁴³⁵ In effect, there was therefore no permanent Indian presence in north-eastern Ladakh and on the Aksai Chin plateau, presumably "because these areas were inaccessible and uninhabited."⁴³⁶

Before the tumultuous autumn of 1959, Aksai Chin was still perceived as desolate, both physically and politically. Indeed, both the Himmatsinhji-committee as well as the implementation of the committee's recommendations seem to have focussed on NEFA rather than on Ladakh. In revealing contrast to Ladakh, where the cartographic Kuen Lun alignment was not followed up by permanent occupation, India made sure to take *de facto* control over most territories south of the McMahon line in NEFA. A telling example is the case of the Tibetan monastery town of Tawang in northern NEFA where British administration had been practically non-existent despite of it being south of the formal McMahon line. In February 1951 one Indian official and "several hundred porters" entered, hoisted the flag and thus established actual occupation to reinforce India's theoretical claims from 1914.⁴³⁷ New Delhi thus made sure to be in effective control of the territory south of the McMahon line before the potential arrival of the PLA.

Indian claims to north-eastern Ladakh on the other hand remained largely theoretical. Similarly, most of the Himmatsinhji-committee's comprehensive recommendations were not

⁴³² See excerpts from Nehru's note of 27/29 October 1952 cited in Raghavan 2010: 235

⁴³³ Prasad 1992: 38; Mullik 1971: 122

⁴³⁴ Prasad 1992: 38

⁴³⁵ Prasad 1992: 38

⁴³⁶ Prasad 1992: 39

⁴³⁷ Prasad 1992: 39; Maxwell 1970/1997: 73

implemented. Looking back in 1987 one officer commented that there was an "absence of a sense of urgency".⁴³⁸ As Sino-Indian relations deteriorated in 1959, few of the foreseen roads had in fact been built. The Border Roads Organisation was only set up in 1960, nine years after the committee had submitted its report.⁴³⁹ When push came to shove China had not been seen as a probable threat to India; India's scarce resources had been prioritised elsewhere.⁴⁴⁰

Interestingly, Nehru had issued a directive after his talks with Zhou in 1954 in which paragraph eight declared that it was important for India to be in effective control of the "entire frontier", and that "more especially we should have check-posts in such places as might be considered disputed areas."⁴⁴¹ In Maxwell's interpretation this excerpt demonstrated Nehru's inclination towards unilateral forward policy logics long before November 1961. Srinath Raghavan on the other hand disputes this reading and argues that, in the context of the other paragraphs of the comprehensive directive, Nehru's intentions were in fact far more modest than Maxwell's partial interpretation would suggest.⁴⁴² The modest interpretation of this 1954 directive is certainly supported by the fact that no significant changes ensued in Ladakh in the wake of it; India did not start to expand its zone of actual control into north-eastern Ladakh, despite the cartographic claims to the area. Hence no early forward policy can be said to have existed there in the wake of the 1954 directive.

It is important to keep in mind that the Government of India's early focus on consolidating frontier defence after the disappearance of the Tibetan buffer was far more impressive on paper than in reality. As argued in chapter one, the real effort was rather put on the construction of a psychological buffer of friendship with China.⁴⁴³ In the period preceding 1958 there was to Nehru's knowledge no Chinese presence in the Indian claimed frontier areas.⁴⁴⁴ In other words, if the frontier policy India implemented after 1950 were at all an early version of forward policy, then it was substantially different from the policy which

⁴³⁸ Major K. C. Praval's assessment in 1987 quoted by Prasad 1992: 51, note 109

⁴³⁹ Prasad 1992: 51, note 109

⁴⁴⁰ It may be noted that in the period 1959–1961, India's defence expenditure increased only marginally in nominal terms. In relative terms, however, as a percentage of total public expenditure, it decreased from 22 per cent to 21.1 per cent. A significant rise in expenditure came only after Chinese attack in 1962. See Kavic 1967: 221

⁴⁴¹ Note to Secretary General & Foreign Secretary, 1 July 1954, cited in Raghavan 2010: 242; see also Maxwell 1970/1997: 80

⁴⁴² Raghavan 2010: 242–243

⁴⁴³ See also Nehru's note on China and Tibet, 18 November 1950 in Patel 1974: 346

⁴⁴⁴ According to IB director B. N. Mullik's 1971 memoirs, there were in fact intelligence reports available on the Chinese road construction long before 1958. For a variety of reasons however they did not reach the highest offices of the government. Mullik explains this lack of information by blaming the Army and the MEA, both presumably believing that it was neither possible nor particularly desirable for India to establish control over Aksai Chin. Mullik, in short, insists that the IB did its job in terms of providing intelligence, but that the message was not properly communicated upwards. In hindsight Mullik blames himself for not speaking directly to the PM, thus possibly avoiding the obstacles put in his way by the Army and the MEA. Mullik 1971: 205–206

developed after November 1961. The pre and post-1961 frontier policies admittedly shared the primary objective of *de facto* control of disputed areas – like Tawang in NEFA. But unlike the predecessors, the policy after November 1961 was geographically expansive in north-eastern Ladakh. And it was far more confrontational in the sense of partly intruding into Chinese controlled territory, not only distant "blank spots". It was not purely preventive, as it had been in Tawang 1951, but had a more coercive dimension. Hence, it does strictly speaking not make sense to equal the moderate checkpoint-policy of the early 1950s with the more proactive "forward post"-policy that would formally emerge after the 2 November decision. The main link between the two policies was the perception that India should establish actual control in territories disputed by China in order to reinforce India's claims. The practical fashion in which this was to be done differed. Before November 1961 the Prime Minister seems – based on the available sources – to have had no intention of physically coercing the Chinese out of territories claimed cartographically by India and least of all from Aksai Chin.

Nevertheless, it was in fact in Ladakh that a precursor to the Forward Policy decision became most evident. The neglect of north-eastern Ladakh remained more or less constant until September 1958 when two Indian patrols physically confirmed the existence of the Xinjiang-Tibet motor road in the middle of Aksai Chin. One of the parties was even captured by Chinese border guards.⁴⁴⁵ India had not established checkpoints along the Kuen Lun alignment even though it had in fact been formally claimed on Indian maps since at least 1954. Hence early Chinese activities in Aksai Chin were not registered by New Delhi. The realisation of this fact and the fear that the same story might repeat itself triggered a new local tactic in Ladakh. The driver of the process was not Nehru or the cabinet directly however, but the Intelligence Bureau – which was in charge of the checkpoints in Ladakh.⁴⁴⁶

In December 1958 the director of the bureau, B. N. Mullik, submitted a number of proposals to the government in which it was argued that "our patrols should go right up to the frontier so that no portion could be surreptitiously occupied by the Chinese on the ground that it was not under effective Indian occupation."⁴⁴⁷ According to Mullik, the idea was first and foremost to prevent the Chinese from extending and further developing their road network in

⁴⁴⁵ Informal note given by the Foreign Secretary to the Chinese Ambassador, 18 October 1958, Memorandum given by the Foreign Office of China to the Counsellor of India, 3 November 1958, in: White Paper (I); Hoffmann 1990: 36

⁴⁴⁶ Prasad 1992: 51, note 112; Mullik 1971: 135–136

⁴⁴⁷ Mullik 1971: 203

Aksai Chin, which he believed they were doing.⁴⁴⁸ It hence appeared to be preventive at first glance. However, the location of at least two of the five suggested new checkpoints would be very near to established Chinese positions and the southern part of their road in Aksai Chin.⁴⁴⁹ In effect, it would entail an unprecedented proximity that could possibly provoke clashes. The proposals were discussed on 8 January 1959 at a meeting in the foreign secretary's room with high ranking civil servants and officers present.⁴⁵⁰ During the discussions, it was agreed with the IB that India should take control of territories in which Indian presence had not yet been established on the implicit conditions that (a) the Chinese did not claim the area yet or (b), in the case of Singlung, the Chinese claimed the area cartographically but were not yet near the area physically.⁴⁵¹ The establishment of a post at Singlung would offer a "safe" form of pressure, signalling that India did not respect Chinese cartographic claims but without risking armed confrontation.

When it came to the suggestion of establishing posts in direct vicinity of Chinese controlled areas just to the south of the road, on the other hand, there was marked resistance from the Army.⁴⁵² In the localities of Palong Karpo and Sarigh Jilganang Kol such action was "bound to invite a clash with the Chinese who with their established motor communications in the area could easily overpower our post."⁴⁵³ Foreign secretary Dutt agreed with the Army's reserved approach because the checkpoints "would be of no use to stop Chinese infiltration" and "might even provoke the Chinese into making further intrusions."⁴⁵⁴ The proposal of establishing posts near the southern part of the Aksai Chin road was hence not approved.⁴⁵⁵

Most importantly, the Prime Minister did not approve of it either. A few days after the meeting on 8 January, foreign secretary Dutt had a word with Nehru who agreed not to open posts near the road.⁴⁵⁶ According to Mullik's memoirs, even the suggestion of establishing a "safe" checkpoint in Chinese claimed but unoccupied Singlung was rejected at the January

⁴⁴⁸ Mullik 1971: 203

⁴⁴⁹ Palong Karpo and Jilganang Kol. Minutes of the meeting held in the Foreign Secretary's room on 8 January, 1959, in: Subimal Dutt Papers, subject file 79, NMML

⁴⁵⁰ Present were, among others, IB director B. N. Mullik, Defence Secretary H. C. Sarin, Chief of General Staff L. P. Sen, Director of Military Operations D. C. Misra and Foreign Secretary S. Dutt. Minutes of the meeting held in the Foreign Secretary's room on 8 January, 1959, in: Subimal Dutt Papers, subject file 79, NMML

⁴⁵¹ Minutes of the meeting held in the Foreign Secretary's room on 8 January, 1959, in: Subimal Dutt Papers, subject file 79, NMML

⁴⁵² Mullik describes the resistance from the Army in his memoirs (1971: 204–205)

⁴⁵³ Minutes of the meeting held in the Foreign Secretary's room on 8 January, 1959, in: Subimal Dutt Papers, subject file 79, NMML

⁴⁵⁴ Foreign secretary Dutt's arguments on 8 January 1959 according to Mullik 1971: 204

⁴⁵⁵ Minutes of the meeting held in the Foreign Secretary's room on 8 January, 1959, in: Subimal Dutt Papers, subject file 79, NMML, Mullik 1971: 204

⁴⁵⁶ Mullik 1971: 204

meeting and subsequently by the PM himself in conversations with the foreign secretary.⁴⁵⁷ According to the minutes however, the proposal of establishing a checkpost in Singlung was indeed approved by the meeting as "a definite advantage".⁴⁵⁸ In any case, Mullik soon protested the decisions of the January meeting in a note to the Prime Minister on 16 February 1959.⁴⁵⁹ After receiving this note Nehru, according to Mullik, "passed orders that while we should not open posts at Palong Karpo and Sarigh Jilganang Kol, because they would be too near the Aksai Chin road and might create tensions, the other posts recommended by me should be opened."⁴⁶⁰ The IB director adds that out of these, only two posts could actually be opened by October 1959 because "before the others could be opened the Chinese came in and occupied the area."⁴⁶¹ The implicit logic, in other words, seems to be that if only more checkposts had been established more swiftly, the Chinese would not have come and occupied the land.

Among the two posts that were in fact opened in October 1959, one was located at Hot Springs in Kongka Pass. It turned out to be much closer to Chinese posts than Nehru seems to have anticipated. While India accused China of aggression in the ensuing clash on 21 October, Beijing blamed India of having trespassed into Chinese territory first.⁴⁶² The approach advocated by Mullik since late 1958 had effectively abandoned prevention in the form of "safe" checkposts far away from Chinese positions for a more activist strategy of establishing Indian presence near or next to Chinese personnel in disputed areas.⁴⁶³ It was still conceived as "preventive" in the sense of halting Chinese occupation of land claimed by India, but it was far riskier than the previous approach of combining prevention with considerable physical distance. In brief, the IB set a new standard of Indian frontier policy in Ladakh from late 1958. The clash at Kongka Pass in October 1959 did not deter Mullik from advocating advanced checkposts, but rather confirmed his earlier suspicions that the Chinese were stealthily expanding their control. The source of the conflict was not new Indian checkposts, but Chinese aggression. The establishment of additional checkposts therefore

⁴⁵⁷ Mullik 1971: 204

⁴⁵⁸ Minutes of the meeting held in the Foreign Secretary's room on 8 January, 1959, in: Subimal Dutt Papers, subject file 79, NMML

⁴⁵⁹ Mullik 1971: 204

⁴⁶⁰ Mullik 1971: 204

⁴⁶¹ Mullik 1971: 205

⁴⁶² See the memorandum given to the Ambassador of India by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, 22 October 1959, in: White Paper II

⁴⁶³ Hoffmann 1990: 75

seemed to be called for. In logical extension: India should have taken a co-ordinated forward policy decision much earlier than November 1961.⁴⁶⁴

Mullik and the IB were stopped before the situation escalated further. After the major clash at Kongka Pass, the Army criticised the recent expansion of checkposts and patrolling and accused the civilian Intelligence Bureau of "expansionism and causing provocations on the border."⁴⁶⁵ In Mullik's opinion, this was "ridiculous, because this incident had occurred more than thirty miles within Indian territory". To the IB director's regret, Nehru on 24 October subsequently charged the Army with the main responsibility of the frontier in Ladakh and thus stripped the IB of its formal direction of affairs there.⁴⁶⁶ Nehru's frontier policy was still carefully circumscribed rather than proactive and confrontational. New clashes were to be avoided.⁴⁶⁷

Had the Intelligence Bureau adopted its own forward policy? The idea of unilaterally occupying disputed territories by symbolic posts had as a matter of fact been formulated years ahead of the Prime Minister's November 1961 decision. The IB was its primary beacon. In fact, the bureau had not merely formulated the idea but had partly also executed it – until the initiative was cancelled by Army HQ after the clash at Kongka Pass. In Mullik's opinion a proactive checkpost policy seemed to be the only realistic option for India if additional territory in Ladakh was to be saved from gradual Chinese encroachment.⁴⁶⁸ As such, it was indeed forward policy in a "broad" sense. But, crucially, it was not yet the Government of India's official policy. Furthermore it was highly limited in scale. It was first and foremost an evolving tactic which had been nipped in the bud by cautious Army officers like the chief of army staff, general Thimayya.⁴⁶⁹ But the intellectual seeds of the Forward Policy decision had undisputedly been sown – in what would turn out to be fertile soil.

(ii) Contextual factors

What were the salient features of the contemporary landscape in which the cabinet decision of 2 November 1961 was made? A tentative map must reflect the general situation of the Indian government in both its domestic and international dimensions. Domestically, the period after the failed talks of April 1960 was characterised not only by continued pressure on the Nehru government's seemingly "soft" China policy, but also saw major shifts within the higher

⁴⁶⁴ Mullik 1971: 322

⁴⁶⁵ Mullik 1971: 243–244

⁴⁶⁶ Mullik 1971: 244; Prasad 1992: 39

⁴⁶⁷ See United States. CIA August 1963: 5, 10

⁴⁶⁸ See Mullik 1971: 246, 322

⁴⁶⁹ Mullik 1971: 244

echelons of the Indian Army. Externally, the government's evolving perceptions of China and the international situation in general helped stimulate new trends in Indian China policy. The domestic dimension in the period up to November 1961 will be discussed first, followed by an analysis of the international calculations of New Delhi within the same span of time.

The domestic context

The political climate in India was flavoured by the fruitless talks of April 1960 and the subsequent failure of the Sino-Indian border commission. The frustrated atmosphere was reflected in three seminal developments within the Government of India; Defence Minister Krishna Menon's hardening attitude to the dispute, the advent of new top brass at Army Headquarters and the increasing receptivity of the Prime Minister to pressure and input from more activist elements within the cabinet and the bureaucracy. The synergetic effect of these developments furnished the fundamental preconditions for a new course in New Delhi's China policy.

Nehru's personal friend and controversial Defence Minister, Krishna Menon, had become a focal point of criticism since the day the border dispute became public in 1959.⁴⁷⁰ Surprised by the new information, even members of the Congress party were demanding his resignation for having failed to guard India's borders.⁴⁷¹ To a large extent, the public criticism of the government targeted Menon instead of Nehru directly. With his vocal leftist leanings, Menon was considered by many to be pro-communist and hence unreliable when it came to dealing with the PRC.⁴⁷² At the time of the April talks in 1960, there were jokes circulating in New Delhi that the reason for Menon's absence from the Indian team was that he preferred to serve in Zhou Enlai's delegation.⁴⁷³ Menon, who had headed the ministry of defence since 1957, was nevertheless one of Nehru's closest associates in the cabinet and was held in high personal esteem by the Prime Minister for his cultural refinement and intellectual vigour.⁴⁷⁴ To a large extent he was dependent on Nehru's personal patronage and had less political capital as an individual.⁴⁷⁵ The failure of the joint commission and the expanded Chinese claim line of 1960 did not calm the acid public criticism of Menon's performance. On 11 April 1961 the respected opposition leader J. B. Kripalani of the Socialist Party delivered a

⁴⁷⁰ Guha 2008: 310

⁴⁷¹ Guha 2008: 310

⁴⁷² Cf. Guha 2008: 310; see also Crocker, Walter (1966/2008) *Nehru: A Contemporary's Estimate*, Random House India, Noida: 151; Galbraith 1969: 72–73

⁴⁷³ Guha 2008: 317

⁴⁷⁴ Brown 2004: 323; Crocker 1966/2008: 154

⁴⁷⁵ Ramachandra Guha (2008: 310) describes Menon as Nehru's "pet"; see also Brown 2004: 323

fierce and eloquent attack on Menon in parliament and drew parallels to Chamberlain's appeasement of Nazi Germany. It was described as "perhaps the greatest speech that has been made on the floor of that House since Independence."⁴⁷⁶ For Menon and Nehru, the onslaught was worrying not only as an indicator of strong public malcontent with government policy, but – more tactically – as a negative barometer for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections of February 1962. Even Menon's seat in the Lok Sabha seemed to be in danger as the popular Kripalani vowed to challenge him in Menon's home constituency of North Bombay.⁴⁷⁷ Nehru, however, did not abandon his protégé and made Menon's cause his own.⁴⁷⁸ To the extent that public criticism stimulated change, it was first and foremost in Menon's handling of popular signal issues – like what US Ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith termed the "Portuguese pimple" of Goa.⁴⁷⁹ It hardly seems coincidental that India's invasion of the Portuguese enclave was triggered in December 1961, only two months before the scheduled general elections of February 1962.⁴⁸⁰ The decision to liberate Goa from Salazar Portugal's unrepentant colonial rule had long been awaited and was massively popular with the Maratha constituencies in which Menon campaigned in January. He finally carried off his district by a large margin.⁴⁸¹

The other key signal issue, in which virtually the whole nation seemed to have invested an emotional stake of honour, was of course the deadlocked border dispute. Goa did not pacify public malcontent with the government's China policy – if anything it rather added fuel to the fire of public demands for firm action.⁴⁸² Unlike Goa, there was however to be no invasion of Aksai Chin. Since independence, Menon had been of the opinion that Pakistan was India's real threat – not China.⁴⁸³ This was not least reflected in the fact that the bulk of the Indian Army was garrisoned on the borders with Pakistan, not on the disputed Sino-Indian frontier. In fact, Menon's approach to the border dispute did not harden until after the failed talks of April 1960. As late as March 1960 his attitude on Aksai Chin seemed to be flexible and open to negotiation.⁴⁸⁴

In June 1960, on the other hand, he suggested to Nehru that India should start patrolling forward in the disputed frontier areas.⁴⁸⁵ Again, in January or February 1961 at a

⁴⁷⁶ Guha 2008: 326

⁴⁷⁷ Guha 2008: 328

⁴⁷⁸ Guha 2008: 329

⁴⁷⁹ Galbraith 1966: 244

⁴⁸⁰ See Guha 2008: 328–329; Crocker 1966/2008: 110–111

⁴⁸¹ Guha 2008: 329

⁴⁸² Maxwell 1970/1997: 231

⁴⁸³ Interview with Krishna Menon in Brecher 1968: 154; Guha 2008: 307

⁴⁸⁴ United States. CIA August 1963: 52

⁴⁸⁵ United States. CIA August 1963: 52; see Mullik 1971: 315

cabinet meeting, Menon launched the idea of systematically establishing military posts deep into the disputed territories.⁴⁸⁶ When Home Minister Pant asked for an elaboration, Menon is reported to have taken his walking stick and pointed out that the posts should be placed in a "zig-zag" pattern in between Chinese posts.⁴⁸⁷ Menon had thus definitely abandoned his initial flexibility on Aksai Chin and was in fact suggesting a forward policy. What had stimulated the new toughened stance? Partly, the failed talks may in themselves have contributed to the change. According to CIA analyses, Menon's changing attitude can also be interpreted through an ideological lens; the growing distance between the USSR and the PRC in April 1960 caused his aversion towards the Chinese – i.e. as a reflection of the evolving Soviet world view.⁴⁸⁸ More to the point perhaps, Menon's hardened attitude can, with a certain parallel to the case of Goa, be seen in connection with the intense public pressure on him and the uncertain political prospects that would face him unless the situation was visibly improved on the ground. Like Goa, the border issue was a symbolic question in need of a symbolic and easily communicable answer. In short, the hard pressed Defence Minister was in search of an approach that could efficiently hinder Chinese expansion and control of Indian claimed territories while also demonstrating to the angered Indian electorate that the government was up to the challenge of preserving the territorial integrity of the nation. Menon's political perspective found a felicitous match in IB strategic analyses. Moreover, he soon found willing supporters within the Army Headquarters.

In addition to being the black sheep for India's failure to guard its claimed frontiers, Krishna Menon ran into deep conflicts with senior officers. He especially developed a tense relationship with the respected chief of army staff, general Thimayya.⁴⁸⁹ When Menon personally intervened in questions of professional promotion in the critical month of August 1959, Thimayya threatened to resign.⁴⁹⁰ After a painful public stand-off between the two men, Nehru finally coined a compromise that kept up appearances. But in reality Menon largely got his will through. By April 1961 when Thimayya retired, Army HQ was taken over by a new generation of handpicked senior officers. They were more pliable to political demands than Thimayya had been.⁴⁹¹ Most influential among the new officers was the new chief of general

⁴⁸⁶ Hoffmann 1990: 95. Hoffmann draws on information from an interview in 1983 with an anonymous MEA official who was present at the meeting.

⁴⁸⁷ Hoffmann 1990: 95

⁴⁸⁸ United States. CIA August 1963: 52

⁴⁸⁹ Gopal 1984: 131

⁴⁹⁰ Guha 2008: 309

⁴⁹¹ See Mullik: 310–311; Maxwell 1970/1997: 204

staff, major general B. M. Kaul.⁴⁹² He was an ambitious and quick-witted officer with personal connections to Menon and the Prime Minister himself.⁴⁹³ He was not least attractive due to his ability to see defence in a similarly holistic perspective as Nehru and Menon themselves did.⁴⁹⁴ Thimayya on the other hand had resented Kaul's promotion on the professional grounds that he lacked practical combat experience.⁴⁹⁵ In fact, the new generation at Army HQ was derogatorily known as courtier "Kaul-boys" among many officers.⁴⁹⁶ The promotion policy directed by the civilian Krishna Menon thus tarnished the morale and unity of the Army at a critical juncture.⁴⁹⁷ Furthermore, it led to a significantly more politicised Army HQ with top brass that was willing to satisfy political patrons at high military costs.⁴⁹⁸ Whereas Thimayya had openly resisted the early forward policy designs of the civilian IB in Ladakh in 1959, Kaul and the new chief of army staff, Thapar, were willing to play ball with civilians in a more flexible and dynamic fashion.⁴⁹⁹

Maxwell, in short, describes Kaul as a "yes-man" who was given the job precisely because of his servile inclination to say and do just what politicians with minor knowledge of military affairs would like to hear. According to Maxwell, Kaul's promotion can therefore be seen as an instance of blatant favouritism and political meddling with professional military affairs.⁵⁰⁰ Srinath Raghavan on the other hand stresses a structural dimension to understand Kaul's rapid promotion; the independent Indian Army was still developing and lacked sufficiently experienced senior officers in 1961.⁵⁰¹ The precocious advent of Kaul may thus primarily be seen as an expression of the fundamental growth problems that affected the post-colonial Indian Army. Kaul's case was not unique, but rather a sign of system failure. Independent of such interpretations, however, the result of this particular promotion was that Army HQ's function as a moderator in policy deliberations was severely curtailed. In combination with Menon's increasing penchant for a coercive strategy, the advent of the politically compatible Kaul provided a keyhole for the opening of a new chapter in Indian China policy. The man with the key, however, was the Prime Minister.

⁴⁹² Dalvi 1969/1997: 69

⁴⁹³ Guha 2008: 309; see also Kaul's (1967) apologetic autobiography: *The Untold Story*

⁴⁹⁴ See Hoffmann 1990: 117–118; Maxwell 1970/1997: 188–189; for a personal description of his politically lauded welfare initiatives, see Kaul 1967:193–195

⁴⁹⁵ Guha 2008: 309

⁴⁹⁶ Maxwell 1970/1997: 190

⁴⁹⁷ Maxwell 1970/1997: 190; see also the memoirs of major general Palit, D. K. (1991) *War in High Himalaya: The Indian Army in Crisis*, Lancer, New Delhi: 72

⁴⁹⁸ Dalvi 1969/1997: 426, 444

⁴⁹⁹ See Hoffmann 1990: 75

⁵⁰⁰ See Maxwell 1970/1997: 187–189

⁵⁰¹ Raghavan 2010: 267

R. K. Nehru's probe to Beijing in July 1961 failed thoroughly.⁵⁰² His cousin, the Prime Minister, privately commented that China was in no mood to settle the dispute peacefully, and that in consequence he would have to adopt a "very stiff" attitude.⁵⁰³ By that time, Nehru was already thoroughly convinced that India's demands were legally and historically justified. India had however clearly not been able to persuade the Chinese by the reason of argument alone. From prospects of genuine friendship, damage control seemed to be the new keyword. A definite policy impasse had been reached. The Asian future which Nehru had wholeheartedly lauded with Zhou in 1954 in retrospect mournfully resembled a castle in the air. But equally so did the opposition's chimerical calls for immediate armed expulsion. The result of such adventurism would according to Nehru be a full scale Asian war which would "be one of the major disasters of the world".⁵⁰⁴ A violent course of action could hence be no policy option for either India or China. Mao's China was perhaps no longer the *bhai* Nehru had envisioned, but as a great Asian power and a powerful neighbour it nonetheless remained a crucial factor in his grand strategic world view. Stability was central to any solution. The immediate challenge for the Prime Minister after the failed April 1960 talks was to avoid new clashes like at Kongka Pass and, secondly, to prepare the economy structurally for increased Sino-Indian rivalry on a much larger and varied macro-scale in the long term.⁵⁰⁵ When it came to popular demands of restoring India's claimed *status quo ante*, Nehru and Army HQ were wary. Cautiousness also characterised the handling of pressure from within the government. On the administrative level, Army HQ under general Thimayya hindered various efforts from May 1960 and onwards to reinvigorate IB-style forward patrolling in Ladakh – emanating largely from civilian bureaucrats in Menon's Ministry of Defence.⁵⁰⁶ On the cabinet level, Nehru reportedly rejected Krishna Menon's direct call for a policy of forward patrolling in June 1960.⁵⁰⁷ Menon's bold "zigzag" suggestion in January-February 1961 was also left hanging in the air, presumably because of Thimayya's sceptical attitude and the logistical problems cited by the Army in desolate and isolated Ladakh.⁵⁰⁸

A few months later, however, the Prime Minister's attitude had changed substantially. In November 1961 the Forward Policy decision was formally passed at the highest level of

⁵⁰² United States. CIA May 1964: ii

⁵⁰³ United States. CIA May 1964: 13

⁵⁰⁴ Nehru in parliament on 6 December 1961, quoted in Maxwell 1970/1997: 177

⁵⁰⁵ See Mullik 1971: 302

⁵⁰⁶ Maxwell 1970/1997: 200–201; Hoffmann 1990: 94

⁵⁰⁷ United States. CIA August 1963: 52

⁵⁰⁸ Raghavan 2010: 273. One anonymous MEA official present at the meeting has claimed that the suggestion was accepted. In reality, it was however not taken further into consideration until November 1961. See Hoffmann 1990: 95

government without any apparent hindrance. What can account for this sudden turnabout? Firstly, of course, the public pressure in parliament and press affected the democratically elected Prime Minister like it had, although more directly, affected Krishna Menon. More importantly, perhaps, Menon's hardening attitude contributed to internal pressure on Nehru within cabinet itself. The operational obstacle that Army HQ had constituted under Thimayya had furthermore been removed since mid-1961; from then on Kaul and officers who were significantly more forthcoming to Menon and Mullik ruled the roost.⁵⁰⁹ Partly as a consequence of this new and malleable framework, there was a power shift towards the Intelligence Bureau. The precarious lack of confidence in Chinese intentions was accompanied by the IB's ability to authoritatively suggest a firm course of action. In the confusion of the deadlock that had developed by July 1961, the ability to present seemingly clear policy alternatives gave the bureau considerable influence at the highest level of government.

In part, then, the Intelligence Bureau gained influence because of the widening gap of confidence between the Prime Minister and Beijing. The lack of confidence in Chinese intentions was not new in itself, but what had made it especially pressing was the recent Chinese claim line of 1960 combined with a series of border intrusions since 3 June 1960. Unknown to the public, there seems to have been made certain informal understandings on border patrolling between the two Prime Ministers during the April 1960 talks.⁵¹⁰ Speaking to an American diplomat, a senior MEA official noted that there had been a personal understanding between Nehru and Zhou that no patrols would be sent beyond the point of "actual control."⁵¹¹ Nehru's rejection of Menon's requests for forward patrolling can be seen against this backdrop. So can the sense of distrust when 25 Chinese soldiers penetrated seven kilometres south of the McMahon line on 3 June 1960.⁵¹² If there was an agreement, it had certainly been broken. India disputed China's explanation of 30 July that 25 individuals had crossed the line by mistake "because of inclement weather when out to fell bamboos".⁵¹³ Both the incident and the incredulous cover story added weight to the argument that the Chinese were not going to stop expanding in Indian claimed territory. It seemed to confirm the warnings of the Intelligence Bureau and thus strengthened Mullik's key role as a provider of analytical premises in the policy making process. The IB argued that China's real intention

⁵⁰⁹ Hoffmann 1990: 95; Mullik 1971: 310

⁵¹⁰ United States. CIA 19 August 1963: 50

⁵¹¹ United States. CIA 19 August 1963: 52

⁵¹² United States. CIA 19 August 1963: 51; Prasad 1992: 61

⁵¹³ Note given by the Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, to the Embassy of China in India, 24 October 1960, in: White Paper IV

was to fill out the blanks and realise the new claim line of 1960.⁵¹⁴ If the Chinese were allowed to do so, the argument implied, they would in turn extend their claim line further. China's word could in short not be trusted.

New information on Chinese activities in Ladakh further reinforced the IB's theory of deliberate Chinese expansion. It had been known to New Delhi since at least 1959 that the Chinese were systematically developing a network of motor roads in and along the disputed areas.⁵¹⁵ As the harsh Ladakhi winter gave way to spring in May 1961, an energetic Chinese construction of roads seemed to take place in the direction of the 1960 claim line.⁵¹⁶ When this thrust was added to the discovery of a Chinese checkpost in the Chip Chap valley in September 1961, Mullik's alarm bells rang.⁵¹⁷ The Chinese post was barely four miles away from the Indian strongpoint at Daulet Beg Oldi⁵¹⁸ and was moreover connected to Chinese infrastructure in the hinterland with what appeared to be a motor road.⁵¹⁹ Army HQ under the new chief of army staff, P. N. Thapar, was nevertheless uncertain whether the post could be seen as a fresh instance of aggression – and hence as a push to realise the 1960 claim line – given that the post could theoretically be much older than the recent Indian discovery of it.⁵²⁰ Mullik disputed this theoretical reservation and found a ready ally in Defence Minister Menon. Menon subsequently criticised Kaul and Thapar for what he deemed to be passivity from the Army in the border dispute.⁵²¹ To Mullik and Menon, sufficient cards were on the table to draw a conclusion. It was now time to act decisively to forestall further Chinese incursions. Another civilian official, Foreign Secretary M. J. Desai, went so far as to suggest that "one of the most effective methods of stemming the Chinese policy of gradually creeping westwards across our borders in Ladakh would be to give them an occasional knock (...) aimed at conflicting casualties and/or taking prisoners".⁵²² As the suggestion was found to be contradictory to the existing guidelines from the Prime Minister to avoid escalation, and as it

⁵¹⁴ Mullik 1971: 309–310; Hoffmann 1990: 96

⁵¹⁵ See for example the note from Foreign Secretary S. Dutt to PM, 17.12.1959, in: Subimal Dutt papers, subject file 39, NMML; see also Prasad 1992: 60; Maxwell 1970/1997: 205

⁵¹⁶ Mullik 1971: 310

⁵¹⁷ Mullik 1971: 312

⁵¹⁸ The post at Daulet Beg Oldi had been opened in April 1961 by chief of army staff Thimayya on the recommendations of the Ministry of Defence (and probably the IB), but it was within Indian territory even by the Chinese claim line of 1960. Palit 1991: 92; see also Mullik 1971: 308–309

⁵¹⁹ Palit 1991: 95; Mullik 1971: 312; Hoffmann 1990: 95

⁵²⁰ Hoffmann 1990: 97; see Mullik 1971: 311–312 for Army HQ reservations.

⁵²¹ Hoffmann 1990: 97. Hoffmann drew on unpublished papers written by the director of military operations (Army HQ), brigadier D. K. Palit.

⁵²² See excerpts of note in Palit 1991: 96; Hoffmann 1990: 96

furthermore was deemed to be lacking in military realism, it was decided to request an IB appraisal of the situation before taking any new initiatives.⁵²³

The Intelligence Bureau moderated Desai's suggestions, but agreed on the need to take practical action. In a lengthy note of 26 September 1961 the bureau argued that the Chinese were systematically expanding their area of actual control in order to realise the new claim line of 1960.⁵²⁴ Clearly, any unofficial understanding between Zhou and Nehru had been violated. China only seemed bent on securing another *fait accompli*. Most importantly, the IB followed up on the negative assessment by confidently outlining a countermeasure. According to the note, the only areas the Chinese had avoided were the ones with an Indian presence – also when only symbolic: "where even a dozen men of ours are present, the Chinese have kept away".⁵²⁵ In other words, the logic behind the checkpoint policy advocated by Mullik already in 1959 had seemed to work. If India were to hinder further Chinese expansion, the number of "forward" posts and patrols would have to be increased and deployed on a systematic scale. The Intelligence Bureau hence recommended the Army to start filling the comparatively large vacuums that still existed in Ladakh as soon as possible with token markers of Indian sovereignty "as, otherwise, the Chinese are bound to move into these areas within a few months."⁵²⁶ The minor vacuums on the McMahon line should likewise be secured by a proactive Indian forestalment of Chinese expansion.⁵²⁷ The note gave the impression that the Chinese threats which would expectedly follow such bold Indian initiatives, were largely to be taken with a pinch of salt.⁵²⁸

The path breaking importance of this IB note can partly be derived from the support it received from Krishna Menon. Worried about the dire political consequences of further land loss and a public outcry, Menon was receptive to the IB's seemingly well argued approach.⁵²⁹ When Army HQ in response to the IB note sought to point out significant military and logistical problems in the suggested policy in their own note of 21 October 1961, Thapar and Kaul were reprimanded by the Defence Minister. He reportedly claimed that "the Army appeared to be doing nothing" to protect India's borders.⁵³⁰ This would undoubtedly have made an impression on Menon's protégé, general Kaul, who was eager to prove his mettle as a

⁵²³ Palit 1991: 96

⁵²⁴ Parts of the note is reproduced in Palit 1991: 97–98; Raghavan 2010: 275; Mullik 1971: 311

⁵²⁵ IB note of 26 September 1961 quoted in Palit 1991: 97; see Hoffmann 1990: 96

⁵²⁶ IB recommendations from note of 26 September 1961 quoted in Palit 1991: 98; Hoffmann 1990: 96

⁵²⁷ IB recommendations from note of 26 September 1961 quoted in Palit 1991: 98–99

⁵²⁸ See in particular paragraph (c) of the IB note of 26 September 1961 quoted in Palit 1991: 97; Hoffmann 1990: 96

⁵²⁹ See Hoffmann 1990: 97; Raghavan 2010: 275

⁵³⁰ Quoted in Palit 1991: 99; see also Hoffmann 1990: 97

soldier.⁵³¹ The director of military operations, D. K. Palit, later in 1971 described the note as "the turning point in our border policy" and lamented that a civilian intelligence agency had in effect been laying down premises for tactical military policy.⁵³² It was nevertheless the IB director's growing influence with Nehru in person that seemed to be the most consequential turning point in this regard. According to Mullik,

the situation was getting very serious. There were areas in our territory which we had not yet physically occupied because they were difficult of access and were generally uninhabited. Unless immediate steps were taken to occupy them by summer 1962, we might find that the Chinese had already moved into them. I stressed these dangers to Home Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri, as well as to the Defence Minister, Krishna Menon, and then I took up the matter with the Prime Minister himself. I had three long meetings with him, in which, with the help of maps, I explained to him the extent of Chinese penetration into our territories since October, 1959, and the areas where gaps existed into which the Chinese might intrude at any moment (...)⁵³³

During these meetings, Mullik convinced the Prime Minister that a forward policy was the best approach towards a devious China. Public opinion was crying for revenge, the politically unstable Menon was calling for a visibly tougher policy and – all at the same time – China seemed to keep "nibbling" on the territory that Nehru by now sincerely considered to be legitimately Indian. After a fourth meeting on early 2 November 1961, Nehru requested Mullik to come back in the evening to take part in a meeting at his residence, Teen Murthi Bhavan.⁵³⁴ That meeting would turn out to be an important turning point in the history of Sino-Indian relations.⁵³⁵

The lack of common ground for negotiations was in short exacerbated by the evolving threat perceptions of China. The civilian Intelligence Bureau was the main source of information on China to the government during this period.⁵³⁶ The basic argument of IB intelligence reports was that China was indeed intent on continued expansion in Indian claimed territory, despite any assurances that may have been given in private by Zhou to Nehru.⁵³⁷ China had not been satisfied with the 1956 line and now systematically sought to realise the new and widened claim line of 1960. India had no guarantee that Beijing would stop there; by giving them an inch, it was feared that they would take a mile.⁵³⁸ Influenced by the flow of rather unambiguous IB reports, key Indian decision makers increasingly feared

⁵³¹ Cf. Mullik 1971: 310; see Palit 1991: 158

⁵³² Brigadier Palit in *Hindustan Times* 11.04.1971 quoted in Palit 1991: 99

⁵³³ Mullik 1971: 314

⁵³⁴ Mullik 1971: 314

⁵³⁵ Hoffmann 1990: 97

⁵³⁶ See Hoffmann 1990: 94; Palit 1991: 99–100; Mullik's memoirs (1971) also give a strong general impression of IB preeminence with central decision makers such as Nehru and Menon.

⁵³⁷ Mullik 1971: 306–307; cf. Maxwell 1970/1997: 221

⁵³⁸ See also Subrahmanyam, K. (1976) *Nehru and the India-China Conflict of 1962*, in, Nanda, B. R. (ed.) (1990) *Indian Foreign Policy: The Nehru Years*, Radiant Publishers, New Delhi: 125

that China continued to expand in Indian territory. Additionally, China had since early 1960 proactively strengthened its relationship with India's Himalayan buffer states, notably Nepal.⁵³⁹ In Mullik's opinion, China tried to "isolate" India from its neighbours.⁵⁴⁰ Worse still, Beijing suggested border talks with Pakistan in December 1960.⁵⁴¹ In India's view, Pakistan and China had no legal common border despite the fact that parts of northern Kashmir bordering to Xinjiang were controlled by Pakistan. Indian suspicions of Chinese malevolence seemed to be reconfirmed.⁵⁴² It would be strategically and politically risky to passively observe the diplomatic deadlock when China apparently kept on playing its own "Great Game" behind a thin verbal veil of good faith. White papers were still going to be published and public opinion closely monitored every single step the government took. Meaningful conversations with Beijing had ceased. On the ground, however, there still seemed to be room to improve India's situation.

The international context

The context that stimulated the decisions taken during that seminal November evening in 1961 was however not purely domestic. While the domestic context in the period from the failed talks of April 1960 to the meeting in November 1961 furnished what may be considered as the fundamental preconditions for the adoption of the Forward Policy, the international analyses of the government added water to the mill by indicating that India's international situation gave adequate room for such a policy.⁵⁴³ The external context thus contributed to a hardening of Indian China policy, without actually causing the changes. These contributory factors primarily stemmed from (i) Indian analyses of Beijing's general strategic situation as well as (ii) New Delhi's calculation that not only the United States, but also the influential Soviet Union were relatively favourably inclined to India vis-à-vis the PRC and that Beijing would have to take account of this.

While the Indian government saw China's actions as increasingly threatening, it also reflected on China's grand strategic situation. In the eyes of Indian analysts, the overall situation would have appeared relatively unfavourable to Beijing at the time.⁵⁴⁴ Due to the insufficient availability of government primary sources, it is not possible to pinpoint the Government of India's analyses of China's situation in the period. But it is out of question that

⁵³⁹ Hoffmann 1990: 121; Mullik 1971: 269

⁵⁴⁰ Mullik 1971: ch. 17, 268–286

⁵⁴¹ United States. CIA May 1964: 9

⁵⁴² United States. CIA May 1964: 9

⁵⁴³ See Palit 1991: 160–161

⁵⁴⁴ See Mullik 1971: 287–288

Nehru, with his sophisticated sense of political analysis, would ignore the international dimensions of the equation. Certain aspects of potential Chinese weakness must have struck Indian China analysts. China's precarious internal situation was one such aspect. In 1961 the PRC was in the midst of the Great Leap Forward, a Maoist reform with highly damaging effects on the internal fabric of the Chinese state.⁵⁴⁵ Like India, China was basically an underdeveloped country with limited resources to spend on what Nehru in 1950 had written off as a "wild adventure across the Himalayas".⁵⁴⁶ Internal Chinese challenges would in short overshadow the peripheral border problems with India. China's international situation pulled in the same direction.⁵⁴⁷ With its most dangerous enemies immediately to the east of the Han Chinese heartlands – Guomindang Taiwan and the US satellites of South Korea, Japan and the Philippines – there was no strategic room for costly adventurism in the extreme west of China's outskirts. In the case of Taiwan, there was the prevalent fear of an outright invasion of South China.⁵⁴⁸ And to the north, relations with the Soviet Union were taking a new and complicated turn. The Indian government was informed of the growing Sino-Soviet split since at least 1960; the differences were expected to persist, "though every effort will doubtless be made by both sides to prevent them from coming into the green so blatantly as they did in 1960."⁵⁴⁹ Nehru attached great importance to the shifting tide, which he considered to be a natural consequence of traditionally diverging Soviet-Russian and Chinese national interests.⁵⁵⁰ With its principal ally, the Soviet Union, taking a provokingly balanced approach to the border dispute with India, China would have to mind its steps. It would hence seem logical for Beijing to act defensively vis-à-vis a fundamentally non-threatening India, even if India adopted a more assertive stance in the border dispute. To Nehru's thinking, there may additionally still have been a faint belief that China would not risk to utterly ruin its relations with a large and potentially powerful neighbour that all in all had been friendly to the young People's Republic since its early days. In sum, China's situation seemed to be such that Beijing would not be willing to gamble on war with India – a war which according to Nehru was bound to end in a devastating and gargantuan conflict with global consequences.⁵⁵¹ In other words, India might adopt a more assertive approach to China in the border areas without

⁵⁴⁵ Spence 1999: 553

⁵⁴⁶ Nehru's note on China and Tibet, 18 November 1950 in Patel 1974: 344

⁵⁴⁷ Palit 1991: 109–110

⁵⁴⁸ United States. CIA May 1964: 32; see Raghavan 2010: 289

⁵⁴⁹ Ambassador K.P.S. Menon's annual political report for the year 1960, Embassy of India in Moscow to MEA, in: KPS Menon papers, subject file 25, NMML

⁵⁵⁰ Mullik 1971: 303; Raghavan 2010: 281

⁵⁵¹ Nehru's note on China and Tibet, 18 November 1950 in Patel 1974: 344; Mullik 1971: 302–303

running high risks of provoking a war. China's perceived weakness seemed to open a room for a more proactive Indian policy.

Such a policy would nevertheless have to be minor in scale and cost. Developing India, too, had other and more fundamental problems to mind. Pakistan was still by far considered to be the greater threat in New Delhi – not least by Krishna Menon who even after 1962 staunchly maintained that "our main enemy was Pakistan", not China.⁵⁵² Other issues were also pressing the Indian government. Southeast of the McMahon line, in the jungles of Nagaland, there was an armed revolt against the central government. Sectarianism, development issues and internal instability also made India vulnerable to external pressure.⁵⁵³ But seen in isolation with regard to the border dispute with China, India's general strategic situation was not necessarily unfavourable. The political sympathy of the United States and the western world against communist China was almost taken for granted, and seemed to have been confirmed during President Eisenhower's visit to India in the critical year of 1959.⁵⁵⁴ The issue at stake was rather non-aligned India's reluctance to bind itself strategically to the western superpower. It was in testing times that non-alignment would prove itself valid.⁵⁵⁵ The most significant international advantage of India rather appeared to be the increasing Soviet ambiguity towards China.⁵⁵⁶ By not openly supporting China the Soviet Union was in fact tacitly sympathising with India, it was deemed.⁵⁵⁷ Khrushchev had remarked to the Indian ambassador in Moscow that "so far as the Indo-Soviet friendship was concerned there was not a single cloud on the sky."⁵⁵⁸

It has later been confirmed that Khrushchev criticised Mao for China's approach towards India, especially with regards to the clashes in the autumn 1959, but it is not known whether Nehru or the Indian government had positive knowledge of this criticism.⁵⁵⁹ During Nehru's conversations with Khrushchev in February 1960, the Soviet leader primarily stressed his wish for India and China, "our two friends", to find a peaceful solution to the conflict.⁵⁶⁰ Nehru nevertheless described it to ex-Viceroy Mountbatten in May 1960 as "clearly" a sign of

⁵⁵² Interview with Krishna Menon in Brecher 1968: 154

⁵⁵³ See Guha 2008: 320–325

⁵⁵⁴ Brown 2004: 320; Mullik 1971: 303

⁵⁵⁵ Gopal 1984: 140

⁵⁵⁶ United States. CIA May 1964: 9

⁵⁵⁷ See Mullik 1971: 303; Subrahmanyam 1990: 120

⁵⁵⁸ Khrushchev quoted in ambassador K.P.S. Menon's annual political report for the year 1960, Embassy of India in Moscow to MEA, in: KPS Menon papers, subject file 25, NMML

⁵⁵⁹ See record of Khrushchev-Mao conversation, 2 October 1959, in: Mastny, Vojtech (2010) *The Soviet Union's Partnership with India*, in: *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 2010, Vol. 12 (3), MIT Press, Cambridge (MA): 58

⁵⁶⁰ Record of PM's talk with Mr. Khrushchev on 12 February 1960, in: Subimal Dutt papers subject file 24, NMML

support for India and "a slap in the face for China".⁵⁶¹ As far as the disputed border was concerned, the Government of India assessed the emerging rift between Beijing and the Kremlin to be in India's strategic favour.⁵⁶² In the analysis of the Australian High Commissioner to India, Nehru viewed the Soviet Union as his "best assurance" against China.⁵⁶³ In short, India's friendship with the Soviet Union seemed to offer New Delhi significant leverage with China in the peripheral border dispute. The international context hence appeared benign for a revision of Indian China policy.⁵⁶⁴ Mullik's arguments for a "firm" approach was buttressed by Nehru's interpretation of superpower politics and China's isolation. Both China's internal and external situation seemed to offer no credible room for a violent response, should India adopt a firmer policy. As such, the international analyses of the Indian government were a contributory factor to the decisions taken in the evening of 2 November 1961.

(iii) The Prime Minister's decision

As agreed during the morning rendezvous with Nehru on 2 November 1961, Mullik returned to the neoclassical residence of Teen Murthi Bhavan in the cool evening. The Prime Minister had called for a "high powered" meeting of leading decision makers and bureaucrats to discuss the way ahead for Indian China policy.⁵⁶⁵ While the peacocks sang in the elegant colonial gardens, "decisions were taken at this meeting that eventually led us past the point of no return."⁵⁶⁶ There are no official minutes available, but the final directives from the meeting were later leaked to the then London *Times* journalist Neville Maxwell. The authenticity of the leaked directives have been confirmed by official government sources and by individuals who were themselves present at the meeting.⁵⁶⁷ Furthermore there are various personal first hand accounts at hand, all from the differing but supplementary angles of IB director Mullik, chief of general staff Kaul and the director of military operations, Palit. Primarily by means of these sources, an account of the meeting will be given along with a discussion of the fundamental premises underpinning the decision and the likely immediate intentions behind it. It was in the shadows of that "high powered" evening of 2 November 1961 that the door was opened for the Forward Policy in the "narrow" sense of the word.⁵⁶⁸

⁵⁶¹ Nehru quoted in Raghavan 2010: 281

⁵⁶² Mullik 1971: 302–303; Raghavan 2010: 282

⁵⁶³ Walter Crocker (6 February 1962) quoted in Raghavan 2010: 282

⁵⁶⁴ Raghavan 2010: 282–283; Mullik 1971: 302–303

⁵⁶⁵ Prasad 1992: 68

⁵⁶⁶ Director of military operations Palit (present at the meeting) 1992: 105

⁵⁶⁷ Prasad 1992: 86, note 89; Palit 1991: 107; Maxwell 1971/1997: 221–222

⁵⁶⁸ Prasad 1992: 68

Present in the room were the Prime Minister, Krishna Menon, Mullik and Hooja (the deputy director of the IB), general Kaul, general Thapar and brigadier Palit of Army HQ, foreign secretary Desai and various other senior officials.⁵⁶⁹ The meeting itself unfolded as a reflection of the seminal IB note of 26 September 1961. Krishna Menon reproduced the same vein of arguments: China was systematically advancing westwards and had recently established a new post a few kilometres east of the Indian post at Daulet Beg Oldi; the IB added that similar advances were likely to continue till the 1960 claim line was established and possibly even further than that – unless an Indian presence were expediently established.⁵⁷⁰ Again, Mullik argued that "even a dozen soldiers" would be enough to deter Chinese expansion in a given area.⁵⁷¹ In line with the 26 September note, he also told the assembly that the worst case scenario for India would be patrol clashes rather than war. Palit regretfully noted in 1991 that "by that time, I think most of us had been conditioned to accept this speculative prognosis".⁵⁷² Mullik's argument seems to have been accepted by the assembly, for the next phase of the meeting was concentrated on a discussion of concrete initiatives in order to put the IB recommendations into effect. While discussing potential geographical locations for forward moves, there only seems to have been reservations from army officers like Thapar and Palit.⁵⁷³

These reservations were basically congruent with the ones Army HQ had raised in response to the IB note of late September (i.e. operational and logistical problems complicating forward moves in Ladakh) and for which Thapar and Kaul had subsequently been scolded by Krishna Menon in person. According to Palit's account, Thapar nevertheless restated his hesitation to venture further forward unless he could support the new posts tactically and logistically. Kaul, according to Palit, refrained from raising reservations on tactical inadequacies.⁵⁷⁴ In his own account, Kaul does not clearly specify his own opinion on the matter but merely notes that Nehru "was told" about the military difficulties in the meeting.⁵⁷⁵ Given Kaul's close connections to Menon and Nehru and the recent reprimand by Menon following Army HQ's reservations to the IB note of 26 September, Palit's account seems credible. What in any case appears quite certain is that some of the professional military problems confronting the suggested policy were indeed raised in one manner or

⁵⁶⁹ Prasad 1992: 85, note 86; Palit 1991: 105

⁵⁷⁰ Palit 1991: 105

⁵⁷¹ Palit 1991: 105; cf. Kaul 1967: 280; Prasad 1992: xx

⁵⁷² Palit 1991: 105

⁵⁷³ Palit 1991: 106; Kaul 1967: 280

⁵⁷⁴ Palit 1991: 106

⁵⁷⁵ Kaul 1967: 280

another and, most crucially, that these reservations were ignored or at least toned down by influential civilian decision makers.

Fundamental premises

Mullik seems to have played a key role in the downgrading of the military reservations. The core of his argument had been that the border dispute with China was more of a political than a tactical military challenge. Overt steadfastness was the most vital factor in countering China's unhindered advance. The Intelligence Bureau had repeatedly stressed that even a small Indian presence of a "dozen men" would forestall Chinese incursions – a view which was endorsed by officials from the MEA.⁵⁷⁶ A violent Chinese response would not be triggered by India occupying what was rightfully Indian territory. The fundamental premise of the IB argument was thus not only that the disputed land was unquestionably Indian territory waiting to be occupied, but – most importantly – that a forward policy would not trigger a large scale military reaction from China.⁵⁷⁷ Despite the well known disparity in military capacity, China's internal and external difficulties, the complex political triangle of India-China-superpower relations and the difficult and isolated mountain geography of Ladakh would presumably combine to temper a violent Chinese reaction against Indian forward moves.⁵⁷⁸ Only minor patrol clashes were to be expected, not war.⁵⁷⁹ This crucial assumption found resonance in the grand strategic approach of Nehru who also considered China's internal and international situation to be too fragile to allow for a "wild adventure" over the towering Himalayas against India.⁵⁸⁰ The international dimension of the question also seemed to go in India's favour, especially in view of the emerging Sino-Soviet rift and the good relations between Moscow and New Delhi. In Nehru's opinion, other priorities and problems would quite simply prevent China from taking rash action against its giant *Panchsheel* neighbour; War with India would entail unacceptable consequences for strategically vulnerable and economically developing China.⁵⁸¹ China would not risk a potential world war for the sake of uninhabited wasteland in Ladakh.⁵⁸²

⁵⁷⁶ Palit 1991: 97, 105; Hoffmann 1990: 96; Maxwell 1970/1997: 221

⁵⁷⁷ Prasad 1992: xx

⁵⁷⁸ Cf. brigadier Palit's conversation with Mullik in Palit 1991: 170

⁵⁷⁹ Palit 1991: 105

⁵⁸⁰ A similar position was formulated as early as 1950, see Nehru's note on China and Tibet, 18 November 1950 in Patel 1974: 344; Palit 1991: 160–161

⁵⁸¹ This argument was present in Nehru's thinking as early as in 1950; see Nehru's note on China and Tibet, 18 November 1950 in Patel 1974: 344; see also Raghavan 2010: 279–283; Mullik 1971: 320

⁵⁸² See Raghavan 2010: 279–280

In his own memoirs, Mullik does not really delve into the considerations underpinning his crucial assumption that China would not react in a vigorous military fashion. Instead, he rather stresses that India had no real alternative to adopting the Forward Policy:⁵⁸³

The only alternative was to hand over quietly all the territories which China had claimed and be satisfied with the crumbs that China might leave with India to show her magnanimity in dealing with a *Panchsheel* ally. But this would only have whetted the Chinese appetite and provided a temporary pause before the next phase of Chinese advance would begin.⁵⁸⁴

In his opinion the Forward Policy ought therefore rather to have been called the "No more surrender policy".⁵⁸⁵ Although it might be challenging to execute, professional military hesitation was to Mullik "a strange logic (...) as no country gives up the frontier without a fight."⁵⁸⁶ The "real trouble" was on the contrary Army HQ's lax and hesitating attitude, especially under general Thimayya.⁵⁸⁷ Military weakness vis-à-vis China was no excuse for not implementing a firm course: "the consideration whether a country is weaker or stronger than the enemy can come only in a war of aggression but not when one has to choose between defending one's motherland and surrender."⁵⁸⁸ According to Mullik's 1971 memoirs, there was quite simply no alternative to the Forward Policy under the given circumstances of November 1961. His only regret was that it had not been implemented earlier – or, in his own words – "had not been stopped in October, 1959".⁵⁸⁹

In personal conversations with brigadier Palit, on the other hand, Mullik explained the assumption of Chinese moderation with arguments strikingly similar to Nehru's thinking: the Chinese were too occupied with "their own grave problems" to react forcibly. Palit found the argument persuasive and admits that "we had become inured to the presupposition of Chinese non-belligerence."⁵⁹⁰ Most importantly, Nehru had also become convinced that the Forward Policy was the most credible course to settle for. According to Mullik's résumé of the 2 November meeting:

after a general discussion, Pandit Nehru decided that Indian forces should remain in effective occupation of the whole frontier from NEFA to Ladakh and they should cover all gaps by setting up posts or by means of effective patrolling. No longer should the Chinese be allowed to encroach surreptitiously into territories not occupied by Indian troops or police. He, however, ordered that the troops should not fire except in self-defence. There was no protest because the task which Pandit Nehru now set before the Army and the Police was nothing new.⁵⁹¹

⁵⁸³ Mullik 1971: 320

⁵⁸⁴ Mullik 1971: 320

⁵⁸⁵ Mullik 1971: 318. Mullik nevertheless employs the name "The Forward Policy" for ch. 19 of his book.

⁵⁸⁶ Mullik 1971: 317

⁵⁸⁷ Mullik 1971: 317–318

⁵⁸⁸ Mullik 1971: 321

⁵⁸⁹ Mullik 1971: 322

⁵⁹⁰ Palit 1991: 170

⁵⁹¹ Mullik 1971: 314

The Government of India's official history of the 1962 war gives a strikingly similar account of the decisions taken at the meeting.⁵⁹² While there may not have been "protests", there certainly seems to have been reservations from the side of Thapar and Palit.⁵⁹³ In fact, brigadier Palit later described the idea of unanimity as an "aberration in Mullik's memory".⁵⁹⁴ During the meeting Palit, according to himself, argued that the army could not go "anywhere forward of Leh and Chushul airfields because of lack of roads, mules and even porters."⁵⁹⁵ Nehru allegedly listened to the reservation, but "somewhat impatiently remarked that he did not envisage a battle with the Chinese."⁵⁹⁶ The officers did not take their case further.⁵⁹⁷ The Prime Minister obviously agreed with the Intelligence Bureau in the basic analytical premise that China would not respond violently to Indian forward moves. According to Palit's résumé he then

gave his directions in a rambling manner not untypical of him. These were to the effect that we must go forward into our claimed territories and establish a presence. Where we were already in occupation, as in NEFA, we must 'plug the holes' through which the Chinese might attempt to infiltrate.⁵⁹⁸

The military reservations on logistics and tactical support for the new posts were thus largely put aside. Similarly, general Kaul understood the upshot of the discussions

to be that (since China was unlikely to wage war with India,) there was no reason why we should not play a game of chess and a battle of wits with them, so far as the question of establishing posts is concerned. If they advance in one place, we should advance in another. In other words, keep up with them, as far as possible, and maintain a few of our symbolic posts—where we could—in what we were convinced was our territory. This defensive step on our part at best might irritate the Chinese but no more. This was how, I think, this new policy on our borders was evolved (which was referred to by some as the 'forward policy').⁵⁹⁹

Both the accounts of Kaul and Palit resonate with the policy recommendations of the Intelligence Bureau: move forward into disputed territories, even with minor troop detachments, but without risking war with China. So do the formal directives that emerged from the discussions. They were signed by secretary general R. K. Nehru of the MEA, who according to Palit's recollection was not present at the meeting himself.⁶⁰⁰ Nevertheless, the

⁵⁹² Prasad 1992: 68

⁵⁹³ Palit 1991: 171

⁵⁹⁴ Palit 1991: 171

⁵⁹⁵ Palit 1991: 106

⁵⁹⁶ Palit 1991: 106

⁵⁹⁷ Palit 1991: 108–109; Raghavan 2010: 276

⁵⁹⁸ Palit 1991: 106

⁵⁹⁹ Kaul 1967: 280

⁶⁰⁰ Palit 1991: 107

written directive written at the MEA was to be formally passed and signed, also by Army HQ under the auspices of general Kaul:⁶⁰¹

(a) So far as Ladakh is concerned, we are to patrol as far forward as possible from our present positions towards the international border. This will be done with a view to establishing our posts which should prevent the Chinese from advancing any further and also dominating from any posts which they may have already established in our territory. This must be done without getting involved in a clash with the Chinese, unless this becomes necessary in self-defence.

(b) As regards U.P. [Uttar Pradesh, i.e. the middle sector] and other northern areas there are not the same difficulties as in Ladakh. We should, therefore, as far as practicable, go forward and be in effective occupation of the whole frontier. Where there are any gaps they must be covered either by patrolling or by posts.

(c) In view of the numerous operational and administrative difficulties, efforts should be made to position major concentrations of forces along our borders in places conveniently situated behind the forward posts from where they could be maintained logistically and from where they can restore a border situation at short notice.⁶⁰²

According to Palit, this written directive reflected at once both a sharper tone in paragraph (a) and a significant, but cosmetic reservation in paragraph (c) compared to the oral decisions of the Prime Minister at the meeting.⁶⁰³ The added sharpness was primarily visible in the term "dominate" – i.e. "observe and cover" to exert military pressure on established Chinese posts.⁶⁰⁴ Rather than to solely occupy the vacant spaces within the Indian claim line, in the sense of deterring Chinese occupation, there was thus also a coercive element to the written directive. Not only should Chinese occupation be prevented, to some extent it was also to be proactively resisted by means of Indian domination over existing Chinese forward posts. To the extent that the wording "dominate" did not reflect the oral directives of Nehru, it would be logical to presume that it had roots within the MEA – where the written directives were authored. After all, it was foreign secretary Desai of the MEA who in September 1961 had suggested that India should start inflicting an offensive "occasional knock" on the Chinese.⁶⁰⁵ The Forward Policy decision of Nehru – even as reflected in the written directives – in other words called for a markedly less aggressive policy than what Desai in the MEA had suggested only a few months earlier.

On the other side, the written directive also clearly reflected an important precaution in paragraph (c). The wording of the paragraph would imply that the Forward Policy as conceptualised on 2 November was not meant to be a policy of "symbolic posts", as Kaul

⁶⁰¹ Palit 1991: 109

⁶⁰² Maxwell 1970/1997: 221–222; Palit 1991: 107; Hoffmann 1990: 97–98

⁶⁰³ Palit 1991: 107

⁶⁰⁴ Hoffmann 1990: 98. Hoffmann draws on anonymous sources. See also Maxwell 1970/1997: 222–223

⁶⁰⁵ Palit 1991: 95–96; Hoffmann 1990: 96

described it, but a policy based on considerable military backing.⁶⁰⁶ This precaution was important for a variety of reasons. On the one hand, Mullik in 1971 claimed that when speaking of a policy based on "symbolic posts" or "penny packets", Kaul's memory had "played a trick (...) due to a great deal of suffering both physical and mental."⁶⁰⁷ Rather than symbolic measures, Mullik emphasises that Nehru had in fact wanted the disputed territories to be "effectively occupied" – as implied in paragraph (c).⁶⁰⁸ In hindsight it would in other words seem as if Nehru did not get the product he had called for, namely a militarily sound policy that would supply the politically desirable forward movement with the necessary tactical depth in the possible, but unlikely, case of trouble. On the other hand, the then director of military operations, Palit, effectively discards this critique as shallow: for one thing it was Mullik and the IB who had argued in 1961 that a "dozen men" would be enough to deter China.⁶⁰⁹ Indeed, Mullik had personally talked to Palit of forward posts in terms of mere administrative presence.⁶¹⁰ Secondly, Nehru and the IB were in concurrence as to the unlikely possibility of a Chinese attack, despite Indian forward moves in the disputed areas.⁶¹¹ In the worst case, "they would play the same game at us – push forward new posts while avoiding open clashes."⁶¹² Hence large and costly military resources demanded elsewhere need not be requisitioned for the policy implementation. Finally, the civilian leaders had repeatedly been warned by professional officers that in the case large military resources were in fact needed, it would be hard to muster anyway due to the very considerable logistical and tactical obstacles – especially in the still roadless and desolate north east Ladakh.⁶¹³

Most importantly, however, Palit argues that the precautionary paragraph (c) was not even a part of Nehru's oral directive. To him, "sub-para (c) was clearly a bureaucratic afterthought; the Prime Minister had not mentioned it (...) It was a brazen ploy at alibi-making by the bureaucrats of the Foreign Ministry, in effect turning our own guns against us (...) seeking, presumably, to hedge their bets."⁶¹⁴ In Palit's opinion, if paragraph (c) were at all to be part of the new policy, then it would automatically have to take precedence to paragraph (a); by implication, the politically desired forward movement could only be implemented after a costly and time consuming build-up of infrastructural, operational and logistical

⁶⁰⁶ Kaul 1967: 280

⁶⁰⁷ Mullik 1971: 315

⁶⁰⁸ Mullik 1971: 315; see also Gopal 1984: 208

⁶⁰⁹ Palit 1991: 97, 105

⁶¹⁰ Palit 1991: 170

⁶¹¹ Palit: 106, 107–108; Kaul 1967: 280; Raghavan 2010: 279

⁶¹² Palit 1991: 170

⁶¹³ Palit 1991: 108

⁶¹⁴ Palit 1991: 107–108

capabilities.⁶¹⁵ General Thapar in principle seems to have agreed to this logic. In 1971 he wrote that if paragraph (c) were to be taken seriously, it would have taken years to implement, a time during which the Chinese could have continued to expand unopposed in Ladakh.⁶¹⁶ In a letter to Defence Minister Menon Thapar did warn of potential Chinese military repercussions in Ladakh and also restated the problematic geographical and logistical aspects of the policy.⁶¹⁷ Nevertheless, in the very same letter, Thapar loyally declared his will to implement the policy as described in the directive's main paragraph (a) should he still be asked to do so, despite not being able to fulfil paragraph (c).⁶¹⁸ Kaul was also willing to implement the directive's paragraph (a) and accorded his approval without apparent hesitation, despite the unrealistic demands of paragraph (c); instead of reneging on political directives from Nehru and Menon, "he was convinced that the forward policy must be implemented as soon after the winter as possible."⁶¹⁹ In spite of serious logistical and operational inadequacies, Thapar, Palit and especially Kaul thus embraced the IB premise that China would not respond violently to the Forward Policy – politically endorsed by Menon and Nehru himself.⁶²⁰ The premise appeared to render the professional military apprehensions of Thapar and Palit less pressing. Seen from this perspective, it thus seems improbable that Nehru, Menon and other civilian decision makers were hoodwinked by the Army in the sense of ending up with an entirely different product than what they had ordered for. The 2 November meeting did not envisage the Forward Policy to be a traditional military operation. In the opinion of the retired general Thimayya – who had vigorously resisted IB policy in Ladakh from 1959 till he left office in 1961 – "China's present strength (...) exceeds our resources a hundredfold with the full support of the USSR, and we could never hope to match China in the foreseeable future. It must be left to the diplomats and the politicians to ensure our security."⁶²¹ With the clear precedence of the offensive paragraph (a) to the logistical and operational precaution in paragraph (c), the Forward Policy decision acutely underlined Thimayya's observation. Diplomacy, rather than forward posts, was India's fundamental insurance against Chinese force.

⁶¹⁵ Palit 1991: 109

⁶¹⁶ Raghavan 2010: 277, note 36

⁶¹⁷ Prasad 1992: 86, note 91

⁶¹⁸ Prasad 1992: 86, note 91

⁶¹⁹ Palit 1991: 109

⁶²⁰ Palit 1991: 105, 108; see Kaul 1967: 280

⁶²¹ General Thimayya in the journal *Seminar*, July 1962, quoted in Guha 2008: 330; Subrahmanyam 1990: 117

Principal intentions

But if the assumptions of "foolproof" Indian territorial claims and Chinese moderation under pressure were the basic analytical premises underlying the 2 November directives, what were the guiding intentions underlying Nehru's decision? What did he want to achieve with the new policy? Despite the lack of primary sources to decisively illuminate the Prime Minister's personal thoughts and feelings on the subject, it is possible to distinguish between at least three broad sets of motives informing the policy decision taken on 2 November. Firstly, the decision could be seen as a response to the perceived Chinese expansion westwards. Since the discovery of the presumably new Chinese forward post in the Chip Chap valley in September, the Intelligence Bureau had expressly recommended, in written form (e.g. note of 26 September 1961) and in the course of four "long meetings" with the Prime Minister in person, that India should counter Chinese expansion by swift and determined occupation of disputed areas that had not yet fallen to Chinese control.⁶²² The same argument can also be found in India's official history: the 2 November decision was taken "in the midst of reports about intensifying aggressive Chinese activities (...) to encroach surreptitiously into our territories not occupied by Indian troops or police."⁶²³ As "the Chinese were steadily pushing forward their posts, occupying more and more of the empty area", India too had to push forward "in an effort to show that the remaining area was not empty".⁶²⁴ In these accounts, Nehru's decision was therefore a necessary and immediate response to external Chinese pressure in the form of yet another "surreptitious encroachment". Indeed, according to Mullik the Forward Policy decision was the only actual option available to the Prime Minister.⁶²⁵

Secondly, Nehru's decision can be seen in context of the strong domestic pressure on a government which was quickly approaching India's third general elections in February 1962.⁶²⁶ It was necessary to demonstrate signally to the public that the government handled the dispute with China with resolve and sincerity. This was especially true in regards to Nehru's friend and colleague Krishna Menon who was severely criticised for not beating back the Chinese incursions. According to general Kaul's memoirs, a fundamental force behind the 2 November decision was "the constant and unrealistic criticism from the Opposition benches

⁶²² Mullik 1971: 314; Palit 1991: 97–98; Hoffmann 1990: 96

⁶²³ Prasad 1992: 68. The official history here draws on Mullik 1971: 314

⁶²⁴ Prasad 1992: xx

⁶²⁵ Mullik 1971: 317, 321

⁶²⁶ Maxwell 1970/1997: 224–225; United States. CIA May 1964: 26; Dalvi 1969/1997: 147

in the Parliament against the way in which he was handling the border situation."⁶²⁷ Indeed, Nehru was squeezed between strong public pressure and knowledge of "the handicaps from which our Armed Forces were suffering."⁶²⁸ Kaul concludes that he was therefore "anxious to devise some via media and take action short of war to appease the people."⁶²⁹ The new discovery of a Chinese post in the Chip Chap valley and the subsequent clear-cut policy recommendations of the IB may thus have functioned more as a trigger than as a cause – this principally being appeasement of the inflamed public opinion. In the words of another officer, brigadier Dalvi, the Forward Policy was "merely a sop to an agitated public."⁶³⁰ Mullik's memoirs, on the other hand, vehemently contradict such interpretations.⁶³¹ According to the IB director, Nehru did not try to "devise some via media" or appease the people quite simply for the reason that "he did what the Prime Minister of any country could do, that is to task the Army to secure the frontier."⁶³² Whereas Kaul partly paints a picture of Nehru framing the policy "principally for the benefit of the Parliament and the public", Mullik exclusively stresses the external Chinese dimension in a choice between "defending one's motherland and surrender".⁶³³

Despite Mullik's criticism of Kaul's account, the intention of stemming a perceived Chinese expansion westwards and, on the other hand, the intention of stemming the rising tide of public malcontent were not necessarily mutually exclusive. Nehru would have had both the external and the internal dimensions of the problem in mind when he deliberated what decision to take at the 2 November meeting.⁶³⁴ The fact that the recently discovered Chip Chap valley post and unanimous IB recommendations may have triggered the call for the meeting does not render the domestic dimension unimportant – neither for Nehru as a democrat, nor for the politically vulnerable Krishna Menon. Thirdly, and most importantly perhaps, Nehru saw the new policy decision in a grand perspective. True to his preference for a negotiated solution, the Forward Policy decision would merely act as a supplement to the stalled diplomacy of words. If China was not willing to agree that both countries should pull out of the disputed areas in Ladakh, including Aksai Chin, because it would merely be a symbolic gesture for India and a large loss for China, then India should improve its standing by controlling more land. India, in other words, could ameliorate its bargaining power vis-à-

⁶²⁷ Kaul 1967: 281

⁶²⁸ Kaul 1967: 280

⁶²⁹ Kaul 1967: 279–280

⁶³⁰ Dalvi 1969/1997: 147

⁶³¹ Mullik 1971: 317

⁶³² Mullik 1971: 316

⁶³³ Kaul 1967: 281; Mullik 1971: 321

⁶³⁴ Cf. Raghavan 2010: 283; Hoffmann 1990:

vis China at the negotiating table by applying a relatively soft and financially affordable military pressure to secure an immediate *fait accompli*. As Krishna Menon later recalled, "our policy in regard to China was one of building posts, showing the flag, and so on, largely depending upon our hope that good sense would prevail. We expected negotiation and diplomacy to play their part."⁶³⁵ In other words, the solution Nehru and the government settled for on 2 November was based on an immediate intention of strengthening India's major interest in a negotiated solution.⁶³⁶

In summary, Nehru's principal intentions behind the 2 November decision would seem to be (i) to halt continued Chinese forward moves, (ii) to demonstrate to the public opinion that the government was up to the Chinese challenge and (iii) to improve India's bargaining power in view of future negotiations with China. The fundamental assumptions underlying the directives given by him at the 2 November meeting were (a) India's "foolproof" claim to the areas in dispute and (b) the crucial calculation that China would not and could not respond violently to an Indian forward policy. Together these underlying push and pull-factors made that November evening at Teen Murthi Bhavan into nothing less than a turning point in the history of Sino-Indian relations.⁶³⁷

(iv) A game of chess and a battle of wits

A discussion of the long drawn and complex implementation of the Forward Policy decision would exceed the limits of this analysis. Causes and origins must analytically be distinguished from the post-hoc perspective of effects and consequences. In order to place the political decision of 2 November 1961 in a wider historical perspective, however, a summary overview of the implementation of the Forward Policy may be in place.

The inherent incompatibility between the boldness of paragraph (a) and the cautiousness of paragraph (c) would soon be reflected in the process by which the government's written directives were turned into military orders. That is: paragraph (c) was not present in the military orders which were eventually passed on to the regional commands from Army HQ on 5 December.⁶³⁸ At that time, the bitterly cold Himalayan winter still held the disputed areas in its sway. But as spring gradually crept up to the windy mountain peaks

⁶³⁵ Krishna Menon interviewed in Brecher 1968: 151

⁶³⁶ Raghavan 2010: 283

⁶³⁷ Cf. Hoffmann 1990: 97

⁶³⁸ Prasad 1992: 68

of Ladakh in 1962, the Forward Policy began to take shape on the ground.⁶³⁹ It was not a policy of precaution, but rather one that was completely dependent on the validity of the two assumptions on which it rested. Its implementation would continue until September 1962, when the brief summer of the Forward Policy effectively came to an end with a severe crisis in NEFA; in the later words of an officer present in the area, "our day dreams were coming to an end."⁶⁴⁰ It finally turned out that a "dozen men" was not sufficient to deter China. On 20 October, China launched a full-scale attack on India in both Ladakh and NEFA.⁶⁴¹

Nehru's government was re-elected in February 1962 and the implementation of the new and officially declared hard line was initiated in Ladakh in spring 1962. A total of 36 new Indian forward posts were established there by September.⁶⁴² In NEFA, where the challenge was very different given that India was largely in effective occupation of its claim, 35 new posts were put up by September to "plug the holes" of the McMahon Line.⁶⁴³ China retaliated in Ladakh by establishing 47 new posts of its own according to Indian sources.⁶⁴⁴ In the words of one officer involved in the process, "we thought it would be a sort of game. They would stick up a post and we would set up a post. We did not think it would come to much more"⁶⁴⁵ General Kaul, who became the undisputed military driver for the policy once it had been formally adopted, thought of the policy in terms of a game of chess.⁶⁴⁶ Brigadier Palit agreed at the time, but later noted that the term was only fitting to the extent that India fought with pawns whereas China deployed knights and castles.⁶⁴⁷ In spite of that, a number of the posts were placed around and even behind established Chinese positions.⁶⁴⁸ Speaking to a cabinet sub-committee in December 1961, Krishna Menon stated that "the new posts would be positioned to cut off the supply lines of targeted Chinese posts; they were to cause the 'starving out' of the Chinese who would thereafter be replaced by Indian troops in the posts. These points would serve as advanced bases for Indian patrols assigned to probe close to the road."⁶⁴⁹

The plan was first put to the test in the Chip Chap valley in Ladakh. Lightly armed Indian soldiers had flanked the recently discovered Chinese post which had played a part in

⁶³⁹ United States. CIA May 1964: 26

⁶⁴⁰ Prasad 1992: 78; United States. CIA May 1964: 43; Dalvi 1969/1997: 167

⁶⁴¹ Prasad 1992: 103–104; United States. CIA May 1964: 53

⁶⁴² By the end of September however there were 48 forward posts, Prasad 1992: 70

⁶⁴³ Prasad 1992: 88, note 109

⁶⁴⁴ Prasad 1992: 70

⁶⁴⁵ Quoted in Maxwell 1970/1997: 171; Dalvi 1969/1997: 74

⁶⁴⁶ Kaul 1967: 280

⁶⁴⁷ Palit 1991: 178

⁶⁴⁸ United States. CIA May 1964: 25–26

⁶⁴⁹ United States. CIA May 1964: 26

triggering the 2 November decision in the first place.⁶⁵⁰ Beijing saw the new Indian move as provocative and loudly denounced it in a threatening note of 30 April.⁶⁵¹ India, however, refused to budge. On 6 May, China supplemented its diplomatic pressure with around 100 troops "in assault formation" approaching one of the small Indian forward posts in the Chip Chap valley.⁶⁵² General Kaul and Army HQ nevertheless stuck to their guns and fundamental assumptions of Chinese moderation: there was to be no Indian surrender. When the Chinese called the threatening move off, it was therefore seen as a major confirmation of the Forward Policy logic.⁶⁵³ When push came to shove, it appeared, Chinese reactions would as foreseen come to no more than empty threats. The Forward Policy could hence proceed unabashed. A second and even more dangerous litmus test came on 6 July. It was in the upper reaches of the Galwan valley where India had established a new forward post only two days earlier.⁶⁵⁴ The director of military operations described the Chinese reaction to the new post as "immediate and violent".⁶⁵⁵ After yet another fruitless note of complaint, 350 Chinese troops advanced within 45 metres range of the 30 Indian Gurkhas. Despite the Chinese being as close as 15 metres on 12 and 13 July, the Gurkhas were ordered to hold their post without firing.⁶⁵⁶ Amidst unusually heavy handed sabre-rattling from Beijing, they succeeded. Yet another time, superior Chinese forces had finally pulled back in the face of Indian steadfastness. Outwardly, it was seen as yet another victory for the "Napoleonic planning" of the Forward Policy, as one leading newspaper put it.⁶⁵⁷ Finally, it seemed, the government had adopted a policy which did what Indian public opinion had been calling for since the clash at Longju in 1959. India was reclaiming its soil.

Within the government, however, Nehru and Menon were beginning to feel that the situation could be taking a dangerous turn.⁶⁵⁸ In July, Chinese reactions had been more severe than expected and the risk of serious clashes was now much more pronounced than anticipated. New and bolder diplomatic initiatives were taken in an effort to hinder further escalation.⁶⁵⁹ Unknown to the Indian government, however, its bargaining power – far from increasing in the wake of extended occupation – had actually eroded seriously; China's

⁶⁵⁰ United States. CIA May 1964: 27–28

⁶⁵¹ Note given by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Peking, to the Embassy of India in China, 30 April 1962, in: White Paper VI

⁶⁵² Palit 1991: 173

⁶⁵³ Palit 1991: 174, United States. CIA May 1964: 28

⁶⁵⁴ Raghavan 2010: 287; Prasad 1992: 75

⁶⁵⁵ Palit 1991: 178

⁶⁵⁶ Prasad 1992: 75

⁶⁵⁷ Palit 1991: 178

⁶⁵⁸ United States. CIA May 1964: 36; Raghavan 2010: 287

⁶⁵⁹ Prasad 1992: 72–73; United States. CIA May 1964: 41

strategic situation was improving markedly in summer 1962, particularly as the fear of an invasion from Taiwan was relieved by assurances that such an undertaking would not have US support.⁶⁶⁰ Furthermore, Chinese suspicions about Indian Tibet policy had by now combined with anger at the visibly weak, but offensive military pressure of India's Forward Policy.⁶⁶¹ China had lost faith in India.⁶⁶² All new Indian efforts at diplomatic flexibility – on 26 July even going so far as to suggest negotiations on the basis of China's 1956 line – were rejected by Beijing.⁶⁶³ Meanwhile, Nehru and the government were in the next turn severely criticised at home for having attempted to make diplomatic concessions at all. In the eyes of the public, the Forward Policy seemed to be working fine, so when new white papers revealed that Nehru had indeed attempted to meet the Chinese half-way through negotiations in July 1962, reactions were intense. In an editorial named "The Road to Dishonour", *Hindustan Times* claimed that the government had "broken faith with the people of India" by having prostrated itself for negotiations with the Chinese "overlords".⁶⁶⁴ Nehru had effectively been trapped by his own Forward Policy.⁶⁶⁵ The government had been outflanked by distrustful China on one side and by a hard line Indian audience on the other.

Despite new and politically costly diplomatic efforts, however, neither Nehru nor Menon – who both thought it perfectly suitable to leave India for travels abroad – apprehended the full implications of the policy India still continued to follow. It would seem that the assumption of Chinese moderation remained fundamentally valid. After the July incident in the Galwan valley, general Kaul still spoke to the US ambassador of China being in a "mood of weakness" which was to be exploited by the establishment of even more Indian forward posts.⁶⁶⁶

By the time of the third trial for the Forward Policy in September, however, China was far more confident than it had been in the previous stages of India's Forward Policy. The new stand-off was to be the end of the Forward Policy and the beginning of an intense crisis that escalated into war in October.⁶⁶⁷ For the first time, China crossed what India interpreted to be the McMahon line in strength and challenged an Indian forward post established in June, at a place called Dhola.⁶⁶⁸ Around 300 heavily armed Chinese soldiers took up position opposite

⁶⁶⁰ United States. CIA May 1964: 32

⁶⁶¹ See Garver 2006

⁶⁶² Raghavan 2010: 290

⁶⁶³ Palit 1992: 73

⁶⁶⁴ *Hindustan Times* 9 and 10 August 1962 quoted in Prasad 1992: 89, note 126

⁶⁶⁵ United States. CIA May 1964: 42

⁶⁶⁶ United States. CIA May 1964: 35

⁶⁶⁷ Prasad 1992: 78; see United States. CIA May 1964: 43; Hoffmann 1990: 117

⁶⁶⁸ Prasad 1992: 77–78

50 Assam Riflemen in the Indian forward post.⁶⁶⁹ Like in the Chip Chap and Galwan valleys, it was decided to keep the Indian position at all costs. But this time the Chinese demonstrated unexpected resolve. By the end of September, the siege intensified into mortal clashes.⁶⁷⁰ New Indian plans to coercively push the Chinese out of Dhola – i.e. an even more proactive avatar of the Forward Policy – escalated the situation to flash point. At dawn on 20 October, as the Soviet Union and the United States were getting entangled in the Cuban crisis, China unleashed war on India.⁶⁷¹ It would be perhaps the greatest shock in Nehru's political career and it would be the end of Menon's.

⁶⁶⁹ United States. CIA May 1964: 44

⁶⁷⁰ Prasad 1992: 77

⁶⁷¹ Raghavan 2010: 301

Conclusion

Despite its ultimate failure, the Forward Policy was not without initial merits. Within relatively short time, the perceived Chinese expansion westward seemed to be halted. There was a general impression in public opinion that the tides were turning and that the situation on the frontier was finally going in India's favour.⁶⁷² In July, just as China reacted in an unexpectedly strong fashion to India's newly opened forward post in the Galwan valley, the informed general public could take satisfaction in newspaper reports on "the unique triumph for audacious Napoleonic planning" which had led to "a general advance over a wide front of 2,500 square miles".⁶⁷³ Menon claimed that one third of the Chinese held territory, i.e. 4000 square miles, had been recovered under the new policy.⁶⁷⁴ It would thus not only appear that the fundamental assumptions of the Forward Policy were valid, but also that the policy fulfilled the immediate intentions of the Prime Minister's decision in November 1961.⁶⁷⁵ With the benefit of hindsight, it is now known that the appearance was shallow. In October 1962, the Forward Policy failed spectacularly.

Both the initial merits and the final failure of the policy have been reflected in posterior history writing. As late as 1971, director Mullik of the Intelligence Bureau warmly advocated Nehru's Forward Policy decision – in which, of course, he had played a crucial part himself.⁶⁷⁶ According to the Government of India's official history, the 2 November decision was "fully justified" in view of the vacant areas that "would have been occupied all the more easily by the Chinese, without firing a shot".⁶⁷⁷ In most other posterior accounts, however, the adoption of the Forward Policy is depicted in the unflattering light of erroneous naïveté – a self-contradictory Nehruvian version of the Great Game. The Forward Policy did certainly not ameliorate Nehru's bargaining power with China, as seems originally to have been intended. Rather, in the eyes of the CIA, "the border dispute was (...) transformed by the Indians from a primarily political quarrel to a serious military confrontation."⁶⁷⁸ The government's assumption of Chinese moderation has been denounced as either a civilian lack of

⁶⁷² Maxwell 1979/1997: 241; see also United States. CIA May 1964: 19

⁶⁷³ Report from *Blitz*, 7 July 1962, quoted in Maxwell 1970/1997: 241

⁶⁷⁴ Centre d'Etude du Sud-Est Asiatique et de l'Extrême Orient de Bruxelles (1968) *Foreign Policy Making in China and India*, Working session November 5–6, 1968, *Courrier de l'Extrême Orient*, Bruxelles: 58

⁶⁷⁵ See Prasad 1992: xx

⁶⁷⁶ Mullik 1971: 578

⁶⁷⁷ Prasad 1992: xix–xx

⁶⁷⁸ United States. CIA May 1964: 28

understanding of military affairs or as a fit of wishful thinking.⁶⁷⁹ As the military capabilities did not match the political ambitions, the policy finally failed. There was no plan B.

The causes and origins of the Forward Policy decision

With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to dismiss India's Forward Policy as a grave misjudgement.⁶⁸⁰ It is now known that Maoist China did not yield to India's pressure, that the forward posts were annihilated within an excruciatingly short time under the Chinese onslaught and – finally – that India was defeated by China in a humiliating war. Unsurprisingly, it has therefore often been asked what went wrong in the implementation phase, who was culpable, and, in India, what could have been done differently to prevent the débâcle. While some have argued that "the tragedy was that the Forward Policy lacked bite", others have criticised the policy in its conceptual and operational entirety.⁶⁸¹ The nature of the Forward Policy as a military operation and its controversial role as the *casus belli* of 1962 has, in brief, been debated in a number of analyses dealing comprehensively with the border war.

A question which has less often been discussed, however, is why India settled for the Forward Policy in the first place. The question is important because it can potentially shed light on both the political nature of the Forward Policy and on the prelude to war in general. What underlying and proximate factors can account for the fact that the Government of India postulated *Hindi-Chini bhai-bhai* in 1958, but opted for the Forward Policy in 1961? In what contextual landscapes was the policy conceptualised and adopted? A variety of new primary and secondary sources have allowed the present analysis to grapple with these questions within a broad historical perspective. In order to contextualise the Forward Policy decision, a set of underlying origins anchored in a long time perspective were first identified. Secondly, the proximate causes that stimulated a turn in India's China policy in the period from 1959 to mid-1961 were discussed. In the third chapter, the principal preconditions and triggering events that underpinned the Prime Minister's 2 November decision were analysed. Seen together, these complex causes and origins add nuances to what was to become Nehru's deeply controversial Forward Policy decision.

The underlying origins of the decision can largely be traced back to the uneasy relationship between early independent India and the newly founded People's Republic of China. On the one hand, the pan-Asian light of independence radiated a sense of strong

⁶⁷⁹ See for example the accounts of Maxwell 1970/1997; Dalvi 1969/1997; Palit 1991

⁶⁸⁰ See Mehta, Jagat S. (2010) *The Tryst Betrayed: Reflections on Diplomacy and Development*, Penguin, New Delhi: 119

⁶⁸¹ See Chaturvedi, Gyaneshwar (1991) *India-China Relations: 1947 to Present Day*, MG Publishers, Agra: 99; for a crushing critique, see Maxwell (1970/1997) part II, 171–256

optimism and a fresh start. On the other hand, the long shadows cast by Qing and British empire builders revived the unsettled geopolitical questions of the past. In this twilight the undisputed architect and *primus inter pares* of Indian foreign policy, Jawaharlal Nehru, chose to emphasise the light. It is absolutely essential to recall that early independent India was a poverty stricken developing country which had recently gone through the trials of partition and whose future as one entity could not yet be taken for granted. Both from an idealist pan-Asian point of view and in terms of practical politics and development, the Prime Minister therefore considered co-operation and friendship with China to be essential for India. The India-China friendship was in short a cornerstone of the Prime Minister's grand strategy. Simultaneously, however, the policy of proactive friendship was challenged by geopolitical developments on India's northern frontiers. Beijing re-established its control over Tibet in 1950–1951. The buffer so central to Lord Curzon's geopolitical vision of India was thereby effectively removed, while the question of the nebulous frontiers was silently revived – to hover on the horizon. Nehru tried to compensate for the geopolitical loss by constructing a psychological buffer, seeking to safeguard India's security by consolidating friendly relations with China. Rather than changing course, as argued by Vallabhbhai Patel, Nehru considered the importance of friendship with China to be strengthened after the invasion of Tibet. For reasons of state the relationship must not be derailed by "petty issues" like the desolate and uninhabited territory of Aksai Chin.

In 1959, however, it was. The relationship changed in a manner so sudden and unexpected to Nehru that 1959 has aptly been called the *annus horribilis* of Indian China policy.⁶⁸² It is within the period from the Tibetan rebellion of 1959 up to the failure of diplomacy in 1960–1961 that the proximate causes of the Forward Policy decision can be identified. Firstly, the Tibetan revolt from March 1959 led to militarisation on both sides of the previously neglected frontiers. The Dalai Lama's flight over the McMahon line and the pro-Tibetan attitude of Indian public opinion seem to have triggered a much deeper suspicion of India in Beijing than New Delhi realised.⁶⁸³ The combination of growing Chinese assumptions of ulterior Indian motives, high military activity on the frontier and undefined borders finally led to confrontations. The fatal clashes of August and October 1959 together with China's explicit and categorical rejection of Indian border claims in September changed the atmosphere of the bilateral relationship fundamentally. Most importantly, the external Chinese pressure triggered a severe domestic reaction in India. After the first clash at Longju,

⁶⁸² Brown 2004: 319

⁶⁸³ Cf. Garver 2006

Nehru broke the lid of confidentiality and for the first time informed parliament of the ongoing border dispute with China. Public reaction was intense. What had originally been portrayed in terms of "petty issues" now became symbols infused with nationalist passion. By continuously issuing white papers, the government exacerbated the public pressure and undermined its own diplomatic room for manoeuvre. Public opinion was a new, but powerful factor in Indian China policy – a fact that contradicts the widely held view that early Indian foreign policy was exclusively the domain of governmental élites.⁶⁸⁴ For the first time, Nehru was no longer serenely in charge of Indian China policy. The combination of external and internal pressure on the Prime Minister furthermore contributed to his growing personal conviction in early 1960 that India's claims were historically and legally "foolproof". Partly as a result of the new attitude to Aksai Chin, and partly as a result of massive public pressure, the highly controversial talks with Zhou Enlai in April 1960 were almost bound to fail – which they thoroughly did. Dialogue came to an end as both countries fortified their diplomatic trenches and refused to contemplate compromise solutions. India would not barter territories, neither would China give India the cosmetic benefit of a "shadow" sovereignty over Aksai Chin. When China at the next turn presented an even more forward claim line, it seemed to be the last nail in the coffin of talks. By the time of the failed diplomatic probe to Beijing in July 1961, a third solution, short of war but more compelling than traditional diplomacy, seemed to be called for.

From having been sceptical about exerting military pressure on China in June 1960, Nehru passed oral directives to initiate just that on the evening of 2 November 1961. This fateful decision was based upon the crucial assumptions that India's claims were indeed "foolproof" and that China would not respond in any large-scale violent manner under pressure. The immediate intentions driving the decision seem to have been anchored in the desire to retaliate and halt the perceived Chinese advance westward, to manifestly show steadfastness before the 1962 general elections and to improve India's bargaining power in future negotiations with China. The process leading to this remarkable change in attitude was contingent on the domestic as well as the international context of 1961. Domestic popular pressure sharpened the politically vulnerable Krishna Menon's inclination for a coercive strategy after the failure of talks in April 1960. Simultaneously, groundbreaking changes took place in the higher echelons of Army HQ. The most significant precondition for the 2 November decision was nonetheless the Prime Minister's increased receptivity to alternative

⁶⁸⁴ See for example Andersen, Walter (2011) *Domestic Roots of Indian Foreign Policy*, in, Madsen, Stig Toft et al. (ed.) (2011) *Trysts with Democracy: Political Practice in South Asia*, Anthem Press, London: 264

solutions. The Intelligence Bureau convincingly argued that China was intent on expanding further. Mullik indicated to the Prime Minister the areas in which "the Chinese might intrude at any moment".⁶⁸⁵ This apparently authoritative information deepened the government's distrust of China. The Intelligence Bureau's ability to confidently propose an alternative and seemingly cost-efficient way out of the deadlock gave it significant influence at the highest level of the government.

These aspects of the domestic context put together furnished the fundamental preconditions for the 2 November decision. The international context pulled in the same direction. On the assumption that China faced a difficult strategic situation in the Far East, and on the assumption of Soviet and US sympathy for India vis-à-vis Maoist China, the Indian leadership deemed it safe to exert pressure on China. Nehru furthermore reckoned that a Sino-Indian war would necessarily lead to ruin and major global repercussions – and hence that neither India nor China could afford to overreact. Mullik's established credo that steadfastness and a "dozen men" would be sufficient to deter a Chinese advance thus fused with Nehru's grand strategic perspective to form the crucial assumption that China would not respond violently to a new brand of non-violent Indian pressure.

Interpreting the prelude on its own premises

A recurrent topic in the literature of the 1962 war has been the question of guilt, both in terms of national guilt and personal guilt. Firstly, did India's Forward Policy cause the 1962 war? Given, as argued, that the origins and causes of the Sino-Indian conflict have deep historical roots, this would appear not to be the case. These historical roots – the unsettled borders, the Tibetan question and Nehruvian India's and Maoist China's differing political cultures and world views – obviously constitute the fundamental causes of the war. The Forward Policy can be understood as a novel Indian response to some of these historical root problems, and may have triggered the war – but the new policy did not fundamentally cause it.

More specifically, a second question has been who fathered the Forward Policy. Several accounts have pointed at Kaul.⁶⁸⁶ While undoubtedly a key driver in the implementation phase, the Forward Policy concept – which preceded 2 November 1961 – nevertheless seems to have originated from the Intelligence Bureau as far as the available sources reveal. Interestingly, Kaul in his own memoirs distances himself from the policy

⁶⁸⁵ Mullik 1971: 314

⁶⁸⁶ See Maxwell 1970/1997; Chaturvedi 1991; Dalvi 1969/1997

decision.⁶⁸⁷ Mullik on the other hand warmly defends the "No more surrender policy", as he termed it.⁶⁸⁸ In fact, the Intelligence Bureau had by and large adopted its own forward policy in the "broad" sense of the word already by 1959 – but was temporarily stopped by Army HQ under general Thimayya. By late 1961, however, the parameters of Indian China policy had changed substantially. Mullik's proposal found resonance at the highest level of government and was finally sanctioned in the "narrow" sense by the Prime Minister himself.

All in all, it is essential to approach the Forward Policy decision from a wide contextual perspective. This thesis has sought to do that and has thus attempted to fill a blank spot in a literature focussed on detailed military analyses and the border war itself. Rather than prejudging the policy as "illogical" based on our posterior knowledge of what would happen in October 1962, it should be interpreted as an historical product – on its own premises. The most important contextual backdrop of the Forward Policy decision was India as a newly independent developing country whose foreign policy was profoundly shaped by one individual. The abrupt turn of the Sino-Indian relationship in the wake of the Tibetan revolt of 1959 was sharper than Nehruvian India's ability to fathom and cope with it. Despite the major restructuring implied in paragraph (c) of the written Forward Policy directive, a substantial and costly reorientation of border defence only took place after 1962. The Forward Policy was thus in many ways a compromise solution in that it was seen as a form of safe and affordable pressure. It would be a cost-efficient *via media* catering both to the angered domestic audience and to the perceived Chinese threat, all supposedly without the risk of triggering a war. The precarious lack of military and logistical capabilities and a threat perception still dominated by Pakistan added to the minimalist logic of the Forward Policy concept. Finally, the lack of institutional checks and balances in India's foreign policy machinery and intelligence services opened the door to the Forward Policy decision. The Prime Minister and his closest associates had exceptionally strong policy influence. The civilian Intelligence Bureau, directed by Nehru's personal friend Mullik, practically had monopoly in assessing and supplying the intelligence premises on which the Forward Policy decision was made. To some extent, it was possible to speak of an attitudinal Nehru faction – unhindered by differing views and perceptions – as represented earlier by Vallabhbhai Patel and, partially, Army HQ before 1961.⁶⁸⁹

⁶⁸⁷ Kaul 1967: 278–281

⁶⁸⁸ Mullik 1971: 318

⁶⁸⁹ Cf. Hoffmann 1990: 247

In sum, the Forward Policy decision has more often been condemned or lauded than it has been critically analysed. It nonetheless has the potential to reveal important nuances if it is approached historically on its own terms. To that effect, shedding the "post-1962" perspective would seem fruitful. The benefit of hindsight must be employed sparsely if we are to avoid the fallacies of anachronism. No one at Teen Murthi Bhavan that November evening in 1961 saw the Chinese attack of 1962 coming. Rather than searching for their mistakes, it must be the historian's task to try to understand their line of thought: a "pre-1962" perspective should be strived for. Adding shades of nuance to the painful past of the border dispute not only has historical significance; it also has clear policy relevance in a time when India and China simultaneously aspire for great power status – while the border dispute remains unresolved.

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Nehru, R. K. Papers

Pandit, Vijaya Lakshmi Papers

Sarin, Harish Chandra (12.02.1991) interview by S. L. Machanda, Oral History

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